FOUR STARS OF DESTINY

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ADVANCE PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

'As a first-hand account of the author's own life, an autobiography offers the readers an unmatched level of intimacy. Manoj Naravane's straight-from-the-shoulder *Four Stars of Destiny* is not just that, it is also an intimate and veritable insight into different roles, functioning and ongoing debates within India's military. His detailed and candid narration of the India–China confrontation in Eastern Ladakh before and after the Galwan Valley incident (Operation Snow Leopard) is very informative and exciting. It will definitely raise the adrenalin level of every reader. As an autobiography writer, Manoj Naravane believes that "I don't just want success for myself, I want my success to benefit others"'—General VP Malik, former Chief of Army Staff

'*Four Stars of Destiny* is the inspiring tale of one of our foremost Army Generals. Engaging, insightful and thought-provoking, General Naravane peppers this account of his life and times with critical lessons on leadership, management and what it means to live life to the fullest—a must-read for readers of all generations!'—Shashi Tharoor, Lok Sabha MP for Thiruvananthapuram, Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Chemicals and Fertilizers, and Chairman, All-India Professionals' Congress

'General Manoj Mukund Naravane offers fascinating glimpses of his life in the Indian Army and his rise to the top as its twenty-eighth Chief. As a compelling personal account, *Four Stars of Destiny* will inform the growing popular interest in our armed forces. Gen Naravane's riveting discussion of the 2020 Galwan Crisis and the recent defence reforms offers valuable insights for all those interested in India's defence and national security policies'—Prof. C. Raja Mohan, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore

'Candid and comprehensive, India's twenty-eighth Army Chief, Gen MM Naravane doesn't pull any punches in this personal account of his Army career. Tracing his own forty-year-long journey as a soldier and officer, Gen Naravane dwells at length on his tenure at the very top (2020–22), spent mainly in dealing with the border crisis in Ladakh and Covid. The book will be read with great interest by both military professionals and defence enthusiasts. A definite bestseller'—Nitin A. Gokhale, media entrepreneur and strategic affairs analyst

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‘An exceptionally candid autobiography that vividly portrays the trials, tribulations and triumphs of a distinguished military career. General Naravane’s narrative is marked by a remarkable blend of humility, self-reflection and intellectual curiosity. This compelling account offers a rare and charming glimpse into the experiences of a leader who, with honour and distinction, guided the service through a particularly tumultuous period’
—Dr (Maj) Anit Mukherjee, Senior Lecturer, King’s College, London

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FOUR STARS OF DESTINY

GENERAL MANOJ MUKUND NARAVANE

Former Chief of Army Staff
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To
My wife Veena, for standing by me through thick and thin,
my daughters Isha and Amala, my sources of strength and inspiration, and
the Indian Army, which took me to unexpected heights

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Foreword

At the outset, let me compliment Gen Manoj Naravane for his excellently written book *Four Stars of Destiny*. This book takes you through his childhood, his training at the NDA and the IMA, and his journey in the Army until he rose to Four-Star rank as the Chief of the Indian Army. The title of the book is very apt, as no one knows what life's journey would be like. As the Gita elucidates: 'One should do his duty and the results will come by.'

Gen Naravane has put out a very honest account of his journey in this autobiography. You go through his experiences as the youngest child in the family, life as a cadet and how he performed as he worked his way up the various ranks in the Army. The book bares open his personality and character. It is the last part of the book that is even more interesting. Here the author has put down his observations, comments, analysis and feelings on many issues that he faced while leading a competent and professional Army.

A very thorough appraisal of several events and issues has been put down, which will ensure better comprehension for all

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who go through it. I would, without hesitation, recommend this autobiography, written in a conversational style, to all who want to understand the different events that he encountered, relive their own journey in the Army, and understand Gen Manoj Naravane the person in and out of uniform.

My profuse accolades to him and his *Four Stars of Destiny*.

New Delhi
23 Nov 2023

Gen (Dr) Vijay Kumar Singh
PVSM, AVSM, YSM (Retd)

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Introduction

Shortly after I retired from the Army in May 2022, I was asked whether I had any plans to write a book. Actually, I didn't. Moreover, I had to seriously get down to completing the thesis for my doctorate, which was long pending. That was my priority. So, although people said that every person has at least one book inside of him, I let it pass. After about six months of sustained work, I was able to submit my thesis, 'Harmonizing Naga Customs, Traditions and Institutions in the Context of Peace and Development' to the Punjabi University, Patiala. With some time on my hands, I started writing a few op-eds for various publications. But still no book.

Sometime later that year, Rachna Bisht requested me to interview for a book on Gen Bipin Rawat that she was working on. When Rachna wrote the book *Bipin: The Man behind the Uniform*, one of the chapters was based on our interaction. I was invited by Gurveen Chadha of Penguin for the book release held in March 2023, at the United Service Institution of India in New Delhi. During the event, I jokingly asked Gurveen, 'When are you publishing my

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book?' To which she replied, 'Have you written one yet?' I had to confess I hadn't even thought about it. Gurveen though, assured me that Penguin would be happy to consider publishing me. That set the ball rolling.

The very next day, we sat down to strategize. What to write about; autobiography or memoirs or a bit of both? How long? Timelines? The last was a major factor. If the book had to be released on some occasion—for example, Veteran's Day, which falls on 14 January each year, then the first draft of the manuscript would have to be submitted by mid-June. It was already mid-March. Were we being too ambitious? After some discussion, we thought we should give it a try. It was really up to me and deadlines only spur you on. The ball was now truly and fully in my court.

How do you write about four decades of Army life and compress it into one book? That was the real challenge. What about the childhood years? Did those shape me in any way and play a role in my life? Do they have any significance? A close friend of my wife, Shailaja, with several works to her credit, advised me not to start this self-editing even before beginning to write. She said that if there was some incident from my past that I still remembered vividly, then obviously it had some import and would have shaped my outlook in some way or the other. Write freely, she said, it will be all the more natural.

All of us have so many memories of our childhood and careers. Many of the experiences we have especially in and of the Army, about our years at the Academy, for example, are almost similar. Nothing new nor worth a repeat. In recounting these events and experiences, therefore, I have chosen those that left a lasting impression and moulded my character or outlook. The manner in which a situation was handled (or mishandled) by my superior, for instance, and the lesson learnt from it. Each

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anecdote, thus, has some underlying message. I have not dwelt too much, therefore, on the three years spent at the National Defence Academy, Khadakwasla, Pune, or of the year at the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun. Similarly, the years as a Young Officer (YO), learning the ropes of Regimental life. Each incident, I believe, is unique to my life, and perhaps not known even to my friends and colleagues, who have been part of or closely associated with my career in the Army.

When a person reaches the pinnacle of any organization, the Chief of Army Staff, in my case, everyone thinks that it was all smooth sailing. There is also a feeling that the rise through the hierarchy was aided by a little bit of *chamchagiri* (apple polishing) and toeing the party line: 'Yes Sir, No Sir, three bags full, Sir.' Nothing could be further from the truth, but I leave that for the reader to decide. I've had my share of ups and downs—on both the professional and personal fronts. We weathered these storms, and by we, I mean our family as a whole, and came out not only stronger but more empathetic with those who would have been similarly disadvantaged. These setbacks, in fact, made me a better person and allowed me to have a more compassionate view when confronted with the foibles and shortcomings of the officers and men under my command, at whatever rank I was at that point in time. As a newly commissioned officer, when I got lost in the deserts of Rajasthan, apart from the military lesson, it also made me realize that such things can happen to anyone, that we are all human and we will all make mistakes.

As mentioned earlier, the thought of writing a memoir was not on the to-do list. Moreover, was my story worth telling? When one joins the Army, one doesn't think that one will become the Chief. One is quite content to pass the promotion exam to the next rank. Most of what I have written is from

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memory. One hardly takes down notes or maintains a diary as a YO, thinking it will come in handy to pen down one's memoirs forty years later. That would be rather presumptuous. My recollection of events and the personalities involved are my perceptions. They may differ at times from those of other persons present or referred to. Places and timelines are generally correct, thanks to the Internet and asking relatives, friends and comrades to fill in the blanks. Their recollections too, might be clouded by time, so errors, if any, are totally my responsibility. As long as it doesn't materially affect the flow of the narrative or the outcome, it should be allowed to pass. There is no intention to show any person or organization in a poor light; once again, it is a matter of perception. A shrug and a chuckle over a cup of tea should suffice to clear any misunderstandings. Nevertheless, if at all any sentiments are hurt, a thousand apologies for the same.

When somebody rises to the top, especially someone not on your friends list, it is attributed to sheer luck. I would rather remind readers, that luck is like the wind, which favours the better navigator, or as Bluntschli says in Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, '. . . a miss is as good as a mile.' And I've had many a near miss. Destiny is always at work, often waiting on the path not chosen. A delay in taking over command of a Battalion probably worked to my advantage, whereas a delay in taking over a Brigade due to circumstances beyond my control meant I could not attend the National Defence College, considered a prerequisite for higher ranks. I, too, thought my career was plateauing, but it was not meant to be. Destiny was at work, pushing me forward, giving me one star after another until I became a Four-Star General, and hence the title of the book: *Four Stars of Destiny*.

Happy reading.

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PART 1

Childhood and Adolescence

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1.1

Skinned Our Hearts and Skinned Our Knees

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The earliest fuzzy memory I have, as against those recounted over the years at family gatherings, is of Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh, when my father, who was in the Indian Air Force, was posted at the Air Force Station, Maharajpur. I must have been about four or five then. We had come there from Bolarum, Secunderabad, but my memories of Bolarum are more from the telling. Of how we used to sleep outdoors during the summer months, the escapades of my elder brother, Nitin, and how he would sneak into a nearby talkies with me in tow, where he had befriended the doorkeeper. My little world comprised my father, Mukund Shridhar Naravane, mother Sudha (née Parasnis), sister Poonam and brother Nitin. My sister was six years older and my brother was four years older than me, so I was very much the bachcha of the family.

My parents had a 'love marriage', which was pretty avant-garde for those times. My grandfather on the paternal side, Shridhar Govind Naravane, had been a civil engineer, mostly

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serving in the United Provinces, now Uttar Pradesh. After retirement, Babuji, as he was affectionately called, had settled into a nice little bungalow on 6th lane, Prabhat Road, a leafy, tree-lined avenue in Pune. He used to live alone with a trusted man Friday, my grandmother having passed when my father was quite young. On the maternal side, my grandfather, Shripad Ramachandra Parasnis, had been a senior and respected professor at Fergusson College, Pune, and a founder member of the Deccan Education Society, until his career was cut short due to an accident with, of all things, an Army truck of the National Defence Academy, which would in time become my alma mater and I, the Army Chief. What irony. My grandfather and grandmother Shalini (née Deshpande) used to stay at Karve Road, Pune, near Nal Stop, so called because there used to be a public water tap (*nal*) there. Though they were our grandparents, all of us cousins, for some unknown reason, used to call them Ai and Dada.

My distinct memory of Gwalior was of going to school, or it must have been pre-school, in a cycle rickshaw that had a wire-mesh cage, with a door at the rear. Two such rickshaws would come to our house, in the officers' residential area, to cart all of us children off to school. On one occasion, I had got into one of the rickshaws and my brother in another, and not wanting to be separated, I tried to get out, but just then the rickshaw-wallah accidentally slammed the door shut on my hand. There was much confusion and wailing and I had to be rushed to the infirmary, but thankfully no damage was done, and I did get a day off from school. I also vaguely remember a row of houses along a dusty street. My sister and brother, being a few years older, would be getting into all kinds of mischief, with me as their unwitting accomplice. Whenever they used to get scolded for various acts of naughtiness, I used to innocently wander off,

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as if I had had no part to play. One day though, my father sternly called me back, 'Manya, young lad, where do you think you are going? Come back here!.' And so, I stood shoulder to shoulder with my siblings. The age of innocence was over.

One day, my father came back with exciting news. He had been selected for a foreign assignment, as the assistant air attaché to our embassy in Paris, France. In the same breath, he also told us to keep this news to ourselves until it was officially declared, as there could be many a slip between the cup and the lip. This is something I too followed throughout my career—not breathing a word of my likely postings or speculating about them until the orders were issued in black and white. However, there were no slip-ups, and sometime in late October 1965, we embarked on the liner *Guglielmo Marconi*, named after the famous Italian inventor of wireless telegraphy, outbound from Bombay to Genoa, Italy. These small titbits added greatly to my general knowledge, something that would come in very handy in later years. On board the ship, we would explore its many passageways, going from one deck to another, often getting lost in the bargain. For all our meals, we had to go to the central dining area and were served by coat-tailed waiters. There was much excitement when for a few days, the shooting of a Bollywood film took place on board. I don't remember the name, but Shammi Kapoor and Dev Anand were part of the cast. We were on board for about a week or so, sailing via the Red Sea, through the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean Sea, with port calls at Aden and Napoli, before disembarking at Genoa. Then we took an overnight train to Paris, where we arrived by mid-November.

We were initially put up in a hotel before moving into our allotted flat at 4 Rue Faraday (another scientist), in the 17th Arrondissement (Sector) of Paris, just off the Boulevard

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Pereire. It was a comfortable flat on the fourth floor, to the right on exiting the lift, and that's how the flat was referred to—'quatrième droite' or 'fourth right'. In those days, there was no concept of international schools, so we had to go to whichever was the local district school. My sister and brother went off to the secondary girls' and boys' schools, the boys' school being at 16, Rue Laugier, where I would join about a year later. But till then, I had to go to the primary school which was somewhere on the Bd Pereire, within walking distance of the house. Those initial days were quite difficult for me. For a young boy, not yet six, who was not even willing to go in a different rickshaw to school, going alone to a strange school in a foreign land with zero knowledge of French, was quite distressing. I have vivid memories of those early days, of not being able to communicate at all—not even being able to request permission to go to the washroom. I remember one occasion when another boy had 'borrowed' my pencil sharpener, and I could not convey that to the teacher. This strange set of circumstances forced us, and I say us because I'm sure my siblings would have had the same problem, to learn the language super quick. Necessity is the mother of invention, but necessity is equally the mother of learning. It was a matter of survival in a foreign land.

I cannot now say exactly when, but within a few short months, we were speaking French like the French. The credit for that should go to my parents because one of the first things they did was buy a TV and encourage us to watch it. The programmes were all in French, subtitles unheard of, and we learnt by watching, picking up the language, the nuances and the accent. We soon even started to come first in class. I became confident enough to start walking to and from school by myself, even during the winters, in my anorak and balaclava. My father filmed me once on his cine camera, walking home

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most nonchalantly from school in the snow. This experience made me quite independent from an early age.

We were in France for three years, from November 1965 to November 1968. During each of the summer holidays, which were in July–August, we used to go on a trip somewhere or the other. One of the earliest trips was to London, where my father's batchmate, Squadron Leader Aggarwal, was the assistant air attaché, his counterpart so to speak. Crossing the English Channel by ferry, which was a roll-on roll-off type, was an exciting and novel experience. On the return leg, we had stopped at the Cherbourg Peninsula, the site of the Normandy landings, my father being a military history buff. In London, we stayed with the Aggarwals, who had two children, Pradeep and Kavita, who were of the same age as my brother and me, so we got along famously. So famously in fact, that when they came over on a reciprocal visit to Paris, Pradeep and Kavita did not want to go for any sightseeing but just wanted to stay at home and play. Later, our fathers were posted in Delhi at about the same time and we used to stay in Dhaula Kuan. So we remained in touch then and off and on over the years, till even now. Some might even remember Kavita; she was the scorer-cum-time-keeper on the first-ever TV quiz show on Doordarshan, hosted by Siddhartha Basu, called 'Quiz Time'.

Another year we went Northwards through Europe and the 'Low Countries' all the way to Boliden, Sweden, where my uncle, Papi Mama resided. Papi Mama had studied in the UK, married a Finnish lady, Helena, and he had permanently settled in Sweden, although he retained his Indian citizenship. We had great fun there, playing with our cousins Iravati, Ravindra and Amalendu. They could not speak any French nor could we speak Swedish, but somehow, we still managed to get along. I remember that once during that stay, I woke up with the sun

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shining brightly outside and jumped out of bed thinking I had overslept only to find everyone else fast asleep. I wandered about the house, finally waking my mother up, who told me to go back to sleep, as it was still the middle of the night. That was my introduction to geography and the phenomena of the 'midnight sun' when close to the Arctic Circle. Another fact that I clearly remember is the long, straight stretches of the highway—AutoRoute—and my father telling me that it was made by design so that in an emergency it could be used as an airstrip. That was in the late 1960s; we would do the same in India some four decades later.

In the third year, we went down south to Italy, stopping at Florence, Rome and Venice, via Nice and the French Riviera. We saw all the masterpieces of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, not to forget the Trevi Fountain, where I tossed a coin into the water and silently mouthed, 'I wish I . . .', a wish which was to come true. My father dragged us from museum to museum exclaiming, 'This is world famous . . . that is world famous', till quite exasperated, I plaintively responded, 'Daddy, can we see something that is not world famous?' At one such museum, I was so exhausted that I dozed off on an ornate chair and a few visitors thought I was part of the exhibit until I was rescued by my mother. My mother used to have a tough time keeping all of us together and fed at regular intervals. I do wonder how much time she got to see all these wonders, while always on the lookout for the three of us. At Venice, we had the obligatory gondola ride, just as a shikara ride is mandatory for anyone visiting Srinagar, and saw all the other sites made famous in the mystery thriller *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown. And, of course, the first taste of pizza, while sitting at a roadside trattoria. On the way back, it was through Switzerland and Austria, catching the sights, sounds and smells

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of the countryside. In Switzerland, I got my first watch—a Fortis, automatic with date—which I used till I bought an HMT Quartz in 1983 from the unit-run canteen, which I still wear today, forty years later. We did the stretch from Vienna to Paris in our Fiat car, a distance of almost a thousand kilometres in less than a day, so good were the autoroutes even in those days, touching 100 kmph quite easily. That car remained with us till the late 1990s for almost thirty years as it came back with us to India. It was a good thing too, because once, on the Chandigarh-Ambala highway, we met with an accident when a bus side-swiped us and the car went tumbling. There were no seat belts or airbags in those days, yet all of us crawled out without even a scratch. Providence.

These travels and the experiences we had shaped my personality in different ways. We got to know of different cultures and languages, accepting and enjoying this diversity. In later years, the concept of 'Unity in Diversity' was so much easier to comprehend, considering each state in India too has its own customs, traditions, language and cuisine. Equally, the value of fine workmanship, whether a watch or car or exquisite pieces of art. Many years later, in one of the school lessons, there was a chapter on Michelangelo, with his quote, 'Trifles make perfection, and perfection is no trifle.' I could appreciate that sentiment, having seen those masterpieces first-hand. It also made me familiar with many different places and names, so that in later years, when I would come across them, it all sounded familiar. This was particularly true in my reading of military history because, in my mind's eye, I could visualize the terrain and weather being referred to. Travel is education, provided one keeps an open mind.

Soon it was time to return to India. In 1967, Israel and Egypt fought a six-day war. There was an Israeli family in our

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building who we had befriended, and I used to go to their house to play with their son. The father had to go back to Israel when the war broke out and, of course, the mother was worried. I don't remember any of their names, except that we were quite good friends. The upshot of this was that the Suez Canal had been closed by Egypt (and remained closed till 1975), and so we had to come back by air. That was my first experience of air travel and of Air India. My best friend in Paris was Michel Tavard, and I wrote to him on the Air India postcard but it never got sent. I still have that postcard, and that is perhaps why I still remember his name. I wonder where all my French friends are now and what became of them. *Que sera sera*.

On our return to India, my father was posted at the Base Repair Depot in Chandigarh. We children though, were admitted as boarders to schools in Pune, our hometown. My sister went to Saint Mary's Girls School, and my brother and I to Bishop's Boys School. Now it was time for reverse adjustment, which was even more difficult. In France, we were '*Indiens*', in Bishop's, we were known as 'Frenchie'. When we had gone to France, I was still in pre-school, on my return, I was in the 4th Standard. In France, we had learnt and spoken only French outside our home, and Marathi among ourselves for day-to-day stuff. But we had no formal learning in the language. On my return to India, I knew no English at all and only a smattering of Marathi. So, once again, I found myself in a similar position of not being able to communicate with my teachers or classmates. It goes to my parents' credit though, that they had anticipated this situation. Towards the fag end of our stay in Paris, they engaged a tutor to teach us Hindi; in my case, starting from '*ka, kha, ga*'. Since the medium of instruction at Bishop's was English, I soon became proficient in English and it became my primary language, while Hindi remained a

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weak spot. In all this changing of schools, education systems and countries, I was lucky not to lose a year.

I had a great time at Bishop's. I was in Arnold House, which at that time was the champion house, and I remember participating in the cross-country run at the Racecourse! Every Saturday, we used to get some pocket money, Rs 2 for my brother, and Rs 1.50 for me. That was quite adequate for small treats: an ice lolly was 15 paise and a cream roll 20 paise. There were different hostels for different age groups and I was in Simba Hostel, just across the road and adjoining the playground. It was here that I was introduced to cricket, as in France we used to play only football. Hostel life also made one more independent and self-sufficient—making your own bed, looking after your personal hygiene, studies and homework; there was no one to mother you. Once a week, we had to compulsorily write a letter home, to let our parents know of our well-being. This was a chore most of us just wanted to get over with, so that we could go out and play. My letters home were quite perfunctory, 'My Dear Mummy and Daddy', I would start, 'How are you? I am well', and end with, 'More in my next, love Manoj.' There was never 'more' ever, except perhaps on one occasion when my brother and I had had a fight and I thought he might 'sneak' to my parents. That week's letter had an additional sentence, 'Don't believe whatever Nitin says.' The schoolmasters used to carry a wooden paddle about the size of a table tennis bat, called a 'flat'. For any misdemeanour, we would be called to the front of the class, asked to bend down and receive 'six of the best' on our posterior. I too got my share of 'sixes', usually for not doing my homework. This was a very harrowing experience and it is a good thing that corporal punishment has been banned by law.

During the weekend, we were allowed to go overnight to our local guardians, in our case, our grandparents Ai-Dada. Sadly,

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Babuji had passed away when we were in France, so we did not get to see him again. We looked forward to those weekend stays for we would be spoilt silly. I would help my grandfather in the daily prayers; taking down the idols from the *dev-ghar,* placing them in a copper *thali*, bathing the various gods, before reverentially putting them back and adorning them with fresh flowers that Dada had plucked from the garden early in the morning, and a 'tika' with freshly ground sandalwood paste. We would then chant the prayer together, '. . . *Manojavam Marutatulyavegam* . . .', referring to Lord Hanuman, chief of the *vanara sena*, which for some reason, was the part I liked most. During the day, we used to play with our friends, many of them day scholars in the same school. There was a huge mango tree in the adjacent vacant plot, which was our favourite hangout. Playing *pithu* (seven stones) was another favourite pastime. I used to be quite unhappy when the weekend drew to a close, especially since the first period on Monday used to be Hindi. Playing with our schoolmates over the weekends gave us an idea—why can't we be day scholars too? The next year, we did just that and were much happier, though it did mean commuting daily in the Pune Municipal Transport bus from Nal stop to Deccan Gymkhana, and then from Deccan Gymkhana to Camp, the to-and-fro fare being a grand sum of 30 paise. That interlude did not last long though, as my father got posted to Delhi.

By then, my sister had joined Fergusson College to study—what else—French. By the time we returned from France, my sister was already in the last year of school, so it was natural that she would go in for a language course in college and make it her career. She taught French in many schools and colleges, including the prestigious National Defence Academy (though after my time), before finally joining the French Department

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of Fergusson College itself, going on to become the head of the department. So, in Delhi, it was just my brother and I who joined the Air Force Central School (AFCS), Subroto Park, Delhi Cantonment. It is now called The Air Force School (TAFS) but remains at the same location, just behind the Air Force Auditorium, within what has now become a sprawling Air Force complex. I joined there in the 6th Standard and remained till the 9th, and that's the longest I was in any school. Altogether, I would see some six or seven schools in eleven years of schooling, which is par for the course for most service kids, a fact that made us more adaptable and flexible, with an ability to make friends any and everywhere.

While in Delhi, we first lived in Safdarjung Enclave, then in Vasant Vihar in civil hired accommodation, before moving to 3 Service Officers (SO) Flats at Chanakyapuri, and finally to 82, Dhaula Kuan, Part 1 or DK-1 as it was more commonly known. Vasant Vihar was the furthest colony in those days, with all wilderness beyond what is today Vasant Kunj. Yashwant Place and Chanakya Theatre were the talk of the town. Dhaula Kuan, the premium officers' colony, was allotted only to Lieutenant Colonels or Colonels. My best friend during those school days was Raju Pendse. His full name was Vidyadhar Vasudev Pendse, but he liked to be called Raju. His father was in Union Carbide and he, along with his parents and sisters Suhas and Shaila, a year senior and in the same school, used to stay in E 9/8 Vasant Vihar. Just to give you an idea of how new that colony still was, we could walk to each other's houses in more or less a straight line, through all the vacant plots in between. Raju also liked cricket and we were both part of the school cricket team, with Raju and I even making the cut for the senior team while still juniors. Cycling was another passion and we used to ride—doubles—on my bicycle through all the dirt

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tracks and rocky areas behind Vasant Vihar. My brother and his friends, who were all senior to me in school, used to tease me mercilessly about my having a crush on Shaila. True or not, Shaila did send me a nice crystal piece as a present when I got married, which we have even now, forty years later. Raju and I remained friends even after we moved to SO Flats in 1972, often having sleepovers, and even after I moved out of Delhi. We are in contact even now, thanks mainly to WhatsApp.

During this period, my father was posted at the Air Force Station, Race Course Road. He enrolled us for riding classes in the school run by 61 Cavalry on Safdarjung Road. The 61 Cavalry Riding School has moved out since then to Brar Square in Delhi Cantonment, but the civil riding school is still there. My father would drop us off for our riding class and then hop across to the Air Force Station to play golf and look into golfing matters since he was also the Golf Secretary. After our class, we used to cut across to the golf course through a shortcut, and we would all come back together. We used to go about thrice a week and became proficient riders, even doing some of the smaller jumps. I also had my first fall then; I must have been in the 7th Standard. That day, my mother had come to drop/pick us up and was watching us ride. She says all was well; she just turned around for a moment and when she looked back, I was on the ground. Even I cannot recollect what happened, though I remember the corral and the spot at which I fell even now. The *ustaad* (instructor) made me get back on the horse despite my mother's most vehement protests, explaining to her that it was the only way to get rid of the fear of falling as well as to show the horse who was the 'master'. I had sprained my left wrist rather badly, had to wear a sling and was a mini-hero in class for a few days. The horses were not all of an even temperament. We used to carry

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a piece of carrot or *gud* (jaggery) in our pockets as a treat for the horse. If the horse had not behaved properly, thrown us off or bucked, or not gone into an obliging canter, we would eat that treat ourselves! No matter that it would be a soggy stinking mess after an hour in the pocket of our breeches. Kids will be kids.

My mother was a teacher, to begin with, and had taught in the Scindia Kanya Vidyalaya, Gwalior, during our stay there. She was a BA and BEd, which was a high qualification for women in those days. This teaching career, of course, went for a six once we went to France. She was also a short-story writer of repute. She wrote in Marathi, and her stories were most sought-after by various Marathi magazines, particularly for their Diwali Special issue. Her stories revolved around real-life experiences, many based on incidents in France, and always had a human element to them. Oftentimes, something that we told her, an incident in school or a closely fought match, would wend its way into her stories. Whenever that happened, we were quick to catch on to the person or incident on which that story was based. It was a game between us; she would narrate the story and we would try to guess the person, incident or outcome.

Towards the latter part of our stay in Delhi, my mother applied for and got selected as a translator-cum-news reader, in the Marathi division of All India Radio. This involved taking the English language news feeds, translating them by hand and then going 'on air' to read the news live. It was quite a stressful job. All the people on duty for that bulletin had to report about three hours in advance, do the translation against the clock and then be composed enough to read the news faultlessly in one go. There were three such bulletins each day and two duties a day was the norm. Back-to-back duties—morning and afternoon

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or afternoon and evening—meant that there was barely enough time to rush back home and finish the household chores before rushing back for duty to the AIR Complex on Parliament Street. Fortunately, my mother knew how to drive, traffic was light those days and she could hold her own. As per the norm, for the early morning duty, the office car would come to pick her up and similarly to drop her back after the evening duty. It was not an easy routine. For the 8 a.m. bulletin, one had to be in the office by 5 a.m., which meant leaving home at 4.30 a.m. That was bad enough in summers and absolutely terrible in winters. Despite this, she always had time for us, had an active social life and made all my favourite things, be it puran poli (a sweet flatbread stuffed with a sweet lentil filling made from hulled and split Bengal gram/chana dal, jaggery and ground spices), or karanji (a crisp, flaky, fried, moon-shaped pastry stuffed with a sweet filling of coconut, nuts and dry fruits). Although a pure vegetarian herself—she wouldn't even eat eggs—she nevertheless would cook delicious non-vegetarian dishes for us, something she learnt during our stay in France. Later, my mother would join the Pune Station of AIR to read out the *pradeshik baatmya* (regional news) at 7.05 every morning, which she did until her retirement. A whole generation still remembers her voice, '*Sudha Naravane aaplyala pradeshik baatmya det aahet*' (the regional news, read by Sudha Naravane).

Delhi, especially Delhi Cantonment, has changed so much since those days. From DK 1, I used to walk to school, usually with my friends, the twins Lav and Kush Chand. We were in the same class from the 6th to the 9th, till I left AFCS. Lav too joined the Army, retiring as a Major General in the Corps of Signals, and was my entry into the AFCS classmates' alumni group. Ours was a co-ed school and among my classmates was a girl named Monica. At that time, a film called *Caravan*

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had been released, which had the song '*Piya Tu Ab Toh Aaja*', with the lyrics going something like, 'Monica, oh my darling'. Needless to say, we used to go around singing that song in our tuneless voices much to the annoyance of our classmate. From DK 1 to the school perched on a small hillock was a short walk. There was no Army Hospital Research and Referral or Air Force Auditorium. We would just cut across the scree, plucking berries to supplement our tiffin. There was no Arjan Vihar, and Pratap Chowk was still under construction, with piles of sand lying around in which we would search for seashells while dawdling back from school. After lunch and a bit of rest, it was off to play. We were not allowed to be indoors between 4 and 7 p.m. This time was spent playing whatever game was the flavour—hockey, football or cricket—or climbing the gulmohar trees that lined the colony roads. By 7 p.m. we had to be back and there would be words if we were even a minute late. On most days, we returned with a bruise or two, skinned knees and elbows, or a swelling somewhere but that was all set right with a refreshing bath, comprising a bucket full of water with a cap-full of Dettol in it. At the onset of summer, my father would take us all to the Air Force Station MI Room, where we would be inoculated against typhoid, cholera and tetanus. It was a yearly ritual, after which we could do what we wanted. Summers were also dedicated to swimming. The Defence Services Officers' Institute (DSOI) was part of DK 1 and had a small bean-shaped pool. We would be at the pool dot at 4 p.m., which was the pool opening time and splash about till we were chased out by the lifeguard once the kids' hours were over. I learnt to swim in the DSOI pool. Our favourite game was to throw a small coin in the deep end and then dive down to retrieve it. Sometimes, four or five of us would go up to the three-metre diving board, run along it and jump down

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rapidly one after the other, splashing water all around. By this manoeuvre, we hoped to impress the girls, but I don't think they were either impressed or amused.

In the educational system of those days, one had to choose streams in the 9th Standard itself and follow that stream till the board exams in the 11th. To help us make up our minds, the school engaged an agency to administer us an aptitude test. The questions were entirely picture-based. Out of a set of three pictures depicting different activities, we had to choose the one we liked best. One set could be a person either in a laboratory or catching butterflies or reading a book. There were a number of such sets showing different combinations of activities. Based on your answer, the results would show your aptitude for science or the arts, etc. My results showed an overwhelming preference for outdoor activities. I don't know about the others, but I feel that in my case, it was a fair assessment, considering that I can't sing or dance, or paint or play any musical instrument, though I appreciate all these art forms.

Irrespective of where we were, it was understood that the summer holidays would be spent in Pune. All of my mother's siblings also tried their best to come. Ai-Dada had five children and thirteen grandchildren. At least half a dozen of us cousins would be there in the Karve Road house during the summer. The house had only three biggish rooms. There was only one bathroom and a separate toilet, so the day was one endless parade to and from these places for our ablutions, where we would go in turn, taking a 'time-out' from whichever game we were playing. There were five of us who were born in the 1960s—Ravindra, myself, Kaushik, Aloke and Veena, and we used to consider ourselves special. From time to time, someone would buy a book, usually an Enid Blyton, which we would read in turn. At night, mattresses would be laid out on

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the floor, bed-sheets spread and all the cousins slept in one line, often waking up in a jumble of arms and legs. Dada also opened bank accounts for all of us in the Bank of Maharashtra on Karve Road, with a princely sum of Rs 5 each, being the minimum balance for a savings account. During the holidays, when visitors came over, they would either bring sweets or give us a couple of rupees as a gift. I would deposit this in my account and feel very grown-up whenever I got my passbook updated. We were thus introduced to the world of banks and the saving habit at an early age. Going to Peshwe Park, playing there on the swings, slides and see-saws, rounded up with 'bhel' was a cherished outing. So also going up the hill to Hanuman Tekdi (hillock) and racing each other down, stumbling and falling and grazing our knees and elbows. I remember that on one holiday we had gone to the hill in the morning. Some more cousins came over later in the day and I volunteered to guide them to the hill in the evening. By the time we came back, I was so exhausted that '*tondatna shabda suddha phutat nahwta*' (too tired to even utter a word) or even have dinner. I just slept and woke up only the next morning to the worried looks of my parents.

My mother's youngest sister, Nirmala, who for some reason we used to call rather informally Rita, had married Shridhar Krishna Kogekar, a civil engineer in the Military Engineering Services (MES). They had two daughters: Veena, who was my age, and Uma, who was six years younger. Because of the age difference between my brother Nitin and me and between Veena and Uma, more often than not Veena and I would end up playing together. Moreover, the others were mostly abroad, in Sweden and Canada. We would spend hours together, much to the exclusion of everything and everyone else. Both our parents being in the Central Government, they would sometimes be

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posted nearby. When we were in Delhi, they were in Meerut and weekend visits were the norm. Then, we were in Delhi together, so the visits became even more frequent. Seeing Veena and I play like this, my grandmother, Ai, would often say in exasperation, '*Yencha lagna lavayla pahijay*' (we should get them married). We were inseparable and more importantly, not mischief-mongers.

In mid-1975, my father was posted to the Equipment Depot at Devlali, Maharashtra. It was his second posting to Devlali. He had been posted there earlier in the 1960s, and that's where I was born, in the Military Hospital, Devlali Cantonment. Apart from the Air Force Station, Devlali is also home to the School of Artillery and the Artillery Regimental Centre. Since my brother was in his final year, we had to stay back in Delhi till the end of the academic year, i.e., till March–April 1976. I had gone into the 9th Standard and, along with some friends, selected a strange combination of subjects: English, physics, chemistry, maths, engineering drawing and bookkeeping and accountancy. I don't recollect whose bright idea it was, and the school tried its best to dissuade us but to no avail. They had to open a new section just for us. The upshot was that when it was time to leave Delhi, there was no school in Devlali offering the latter two subjects in this combo. My parents cast the net wider and chanced upon a school in Pune willing to consider this, provided I passed their admission test, which was not a standard written exam but an IQ test. I don't know what was the cut-off criteria (best not to ask/know), but apparently, I qualified, and that's how I came to join Jnana Prabodhini Prashala, Sadashiv Peth, Pune.

Dr Vinayak Vishvanath Pendse, fondly called Appa Saheb, was a visionary educationist. As a true patriot, he had taken an active part in the freedom struggle. Immediately after

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Independence, he took upon himself the responsibility of rebuilding independent India, for which motivated intellectuals were needed. With this in mind, he founded Jnana Prabodhini Prashala (JPP) for the gifted in 1962. When I joined JPP, as it was more commonly known, in the summer of 1974, it was still a fledging institution. The school building was not yet complete, only three floors of the planned five floors were ready. Class strengths were small, my class had only twenty-five students of all streams combined—arts, biology and science. Our teachers were highly motivated and could give us personalized attention. The principal then was Yashwant Rao and the vice principal was Vaman Rao, who was also our maths teacher. Vaman Rao, who later became the principal himself, had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the maths syllabus. You could ask him any query by just telling him the chapter and question number, and he would tell you how to solve that problem.

The school placed great emphasis on character qualities and self-discipline. I distinctly remember that during exams, we would be given the question papers and answer sheets and our teacher would then leave the class. Nobody ever thought of copying from anyone. Whatever marks we secured, we were happy with that. In such an open and secure environment, one could concentrate on studies. JPP was also progressive in the sense that there was no school uniform, Monday to Friday. You could come in any dress, shorts, T-shirt, jeans, chappals—as long as it was clean. Only on Saturdays did we have to wear a uniform—a white churidar, pink *jhabba* (kurta) and white cap, popularly known as Gandhi topi. When I first came to know of it, I revolted and refused to join the school, but since there was no alternative, I had to acquiesce. Pink was something only girls wore! I used to try to find ways to avoid wearing that dress, feign illness on Saturdays or simply 'forget' what day of

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the week it was and wear normal clothes to school. But our principal knew of all these tricks, as I was not the only one so disposed. After pardoning us a couple of times, he would send us habitual defaulters back home to change and return, if we did not want to be marked absent. When we used to go for overnight camps, we would often sing the song '*Jayostute*' composed by Veer Savarkar, a most fervent and patriotic song exhorting the people to fight for freedom. I didn't know most of the words and would mostly hum along, but the patriotic fervour in the song was unmistakable.

जयोऽस्तु ते, श्री महन्मंगले शिवास्पदे शुभदे
स्वतंत्रते भगवती त्वामहम् यशोयुतां वंदे!

[Victory to you, Oh! Ever auspicious, munificent and holy Mother!
Oh! Glorious Goddess of Freedom! I seek your blessings for success.]

On the ground floor was an Upasana Mandir (prayer hall) where the upasana would be held on Saturdays. On the rest of the days, we would go up directly to our classes; there was no formal assembly as such. Though founded on the basis of spirituality and Advaita, there was no overemphasis on religion, as the school believed that there was no conflict between spirituality and scientific temper. School was from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. with a lunch break in between. Post a forty-five-minute break, we used to have a compulsory games period. This break was long enough for those staying close by to go home and have a snack. However, some of us who were boarders or stayed far away, had to do without. JPP did not have any playing fields of its own, so we used to cross Tilak

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Road and play on the grounds of the New English School. The choice was between football, basketball, kho-kho and kabaddi. The school frowned on individual or elitist sports like cricket. I had to obtain special permission to go thrice a week for cricket coaching at the PYC grounds at Deccan Gymkhana. On those days, I would walk there straight after school and be able to play till about 6 p.m. This arrangement was not very satisfactory, however, and I feel I could never realize my full potential, despite having been part of the school team in Delhi.

The Saturday prayer would be led by my classmate, Nandakumar (Nandu) Koregaonkar. Nandu too joined the Army; we were coursemates too, and he was Commissioned into the First Battalion of the Parachute Regiment (1 PARA). Another classmate who joined the Army was Sarwottam Shrikant Hasabnis, who followed in his father's footsteps and joined the Jat Regiment. His father had been taken prisoner of war at Galwan during the 1962 war, the same place which was to witness bloody clashes between troops of the Chinese People's Liberation Army and our own troops in June 2020. His younger brother, Sadanand Shrikant Hasabnis, joined a year later, rose to the rank of Lieutenant General and retired as the Deputy Chief of the Army Staff. All my other classmates did equally well in their chosen fields. Milind Modak is an orthopaedist of renown. Rajeev Ranade retired as a Commissioner in the Income Tax Department. Dattatreya (Sunil) Modak has his own successful company. Vijay Inamdar worked on various defence-related projects, including the first indigenous nuclear submarine, 'Arihant'. The list of accomplishments is long. I stayed in touch with my classmates as best as possible, looking up one or the other while on leave in Pune. We were and remain a close-knit group.

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Initially, after joining JPP, I stayed in a sort of hostel run by Ms Dixit. I say 'sort of' because it was basically one floor of a house. All the younger kids would sleep on the floor, in one hall that had a raised platform at one end, which became a bed once all the mattresses were taken down. Above the kitchen was a small loft with a wooden pallet that doubled as a bed. Nandu and I, being the senior-most, had the honour of getting these beds to sleep on. At about this time, our house at 53 Anand Park was ready and I saw no merit in staying in a hostel. After a bit of stubbornness on my part, my parents relented and I shifted there. A cook was employed to look after breakfast and dinner, and lunch was delivered at school through a 'tiffin' service. I stayed alone thus, often rustling up some egg curry and rice for dinner when Balu the cook would be unwell or on *chhutti* (holiday). This arrangement, though it made me quite independent, did not last long. I was in the final year of school with board exams less than a year away, so my mother moved down from Devlali to 'supervise' me. It was a relief to have her around, especially since Balu had limited culinary expertise.

Since my father was in Devlali, I would go there for the school holidays. My father's friend, Wing Commander GJ Singh, was also posted there and they were good friends. They had two sons, Karambir (KB) and Paramvir (Pampi); KB being of my age and Pampi a couple of years younger. There were other children too in the Air Force Station and we all used to play various games together. Cricket was, of course, our favourite. Since the playing field was opposite KB's house, we would all troop there for a 'drinks' break. KB's mother, Raji auntie as we called her, would get quite exasperated on account of having to fill the empty water bottles time and again. Once while playing on the driveway, a

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wayward shot bounced over the sloping tiled roof, rebounded from somewhere and broke a window pane to the rear of the house. GJ uncle was quite perplexed and instead of scolding us, genuinely wanted to know how while playing in the front courtyard, could one hit a glass pane at the rear of the house. We also used to go swimming in the Dharna River, which was just below the Officers' Mess. All of us could easily swim a couple of breaths, learning how to tackle the current so as to not drift downstream. Once when I had cut the heel of my foot on a piece of broken glass thrown carelessly in the river by someone, all the little fishes came swarming about, drawn by the scent of blood. Oftentimes, being ravenous after our exertions, we would go to the Mess and raid the fridge, leaving nothing for the single dining-in members. They were good sports though and never complained, such is the camaraderie in the service. KB went on to become the Chief of Naval Staff and when we were Chiefs together, the years spent together as children helped immensely.

In all these years, I hardly remember studying with the kind of intensity one sees these days. Even when final or board exams were due, one did not curtail other activities. I never had to take any tuitions, except for a couple of years immediately on our return from France, to catch up on Hindi. The rest we did by ourselves or through group study. I wasn't an outstanding student, but I did manage to get a first division in the boards, with a 'distinction' in a couple of subjects. We were at 53 Anand Park, Aundh, and once the results were declared, my mother, as was customary, distributed pedhas (a sweet made of thickened milk) to close friends and neighbours. By then, I had already applied for the National Defence Academy, Khadakwasla, Pune, qualified in the written exam and interview, and was only awaiting my

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call letter, listening to songs on Radio Ceylon. A very popular song in those days was 'Seasons in the Sun' by Terry Jacks, which was my favourite. I particularly liked the lyrics, which perfectly summed up our adolescent years.

'Goodbye to you, my trusted friend,
We've known each other since we were nine or ten,
Together, we've climbed hills and trees,
Learned of love and ABCs,
Skinned our hearts and skinned our knees.'

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1.2

From Civvies to Uniform

The call letter to join the NDA 56th Course, Autumn Term, commencing July 1976, finally came, but with a twist. Instead of reporting to NDA, Khadakwasla, Pune, I was to report to the NDA Wing at the Officer Training School (OTS—now Officer Training Academy), Madras (now Chennai). Those few weeks of waiting were quite worrying because I had not applied for or given any entrance exams for any other course or institution. Had I not got into the NDA, I would have been out on a limb and lost a year. My father being in the Services had, of course, been a key factor in my wanting to follow in his footsteps; my mother, though, wasn't too keen on sending her *laadka* (favourite son) to the Army, as she felt I was more suited for an intellectual life. Had it not been for the NDA, I probably would have become an architect, as I had been quite impressed by the character of Howard Roark, in Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*. However, once she knew that my mind was made up, that it was my choice and not under any pressure from my father, she steeled her heart and supported me wholeheartedly. My father was in the Air Force, but he had originally been an

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Army cadet, at the IMA, Dehradun as part of the 5th Course, even participating in the inaugural parade of the Joint Services Wing, Clement Town, Dehradun, which later became the NDA. Unfortunately, while playing football one evening, he broke his knee and had to leave on medical grounds, as he was permanently downgraded to 'unfit for military service'. It was only after that, on completion of his graduation, that he joined the Air Force. But in his heart of hearts, he was an Army man and an Infantryman to boot, and that was to affect my decisions in later years.

The arrival of the call letter set in train a whole set of activities. By then, my brother Nitin had also come to Pune and was pursuing a degree at the Brihan Maharashtra College of Commerce (BMCC). My mother and he decided that I was too skinny (I must have been about 45 kg or so) and needed to be fattened up, like the proverbial sacrificial lamb, although I had passed my medical exam, with the medical officer declaring it was better to be underweight than overweight. So, one morning, a sumptuous continental breakfast was laid out, not unlike what I would later have at the Academy. Juice, porridge, eggs with fries on the side, toast with butter and jam, topped up with malted milk. I dutifully consumed the entire spread and then going to the washroom, brought it all out in the bathroom sink. That was the first and last attempt to 'fatten' me. Then there was the question of obtaining a reservation on a train to Madras. After consulting the Bradshaw, I went to the Pune Railway Station and bought a second-class sleeper ticket for a grand sum of Rs 50. I was fearful of pickpockets and not wanting to lose the ticket, instead of keeping it in my wallet, kept it somewhere else. On returning home, I just couldn't find the ticket and could not fathom how and when it must have fallen out and got lost. It was most embarrassing, to say the

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least. Here was I, off to join the Army to defend the country and I couldn't even keep a train ticket safe. Of course, I had to buy another ticket and pay for it out of my pocket money.

The great day dawned, and everyone came to see me off at the station. I had been fully kitted out, including the famous black trunk made to precise dimensions; 100 cm long, 50 cm wide and 25 cm high. These dimensions were so that one could keep one's trousers flat without folding or creasing and so that it would fit exactly under a railway berth. The guard blew his whistle, waved his green flag and I was off on my adventure, my mother fighting hard to hold back her tears. And what an adventure it has been. I was a little over sixteen years old then, in the summer of 1976, and I would retire some forty-six years later, in the summer of 2022.

Unknown to us, it had been decided to increase the intake at the NDA in an attempt to make up for the shortage of officers plaguing the Army. I say attempt, because we were some 12,000 officers short then, and are still about 7000 officers short today, four decades later. The establishment at Khadakwasla having been utilized to capacity, it was decided to open a Wing of the NDA at the Officer Training School (OTS), which had some spare capacity.[1] The OTS was, and is a full-fledged Academy imparting pre-commission training to short-service commission aspirants, who join after having done their graduation from civil universities. This, the NDA Wing had started only six months earlier, with the 55th Course, Spring Term 1976. Notable among the cadets of this course was Cadet Satish Dua, who rose to the rank of Lieutenant General, retiring as the Chief of Integrated Defence Staff to the Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee (CISC). My stay at the OTS was short-lived. Out of the call letters sent for joining up the main campus, many candidates had failed to turn up, or on

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joining and seeing the conditions, voluntarily withdrew. Thus, there were still slots open at the NDA main campus, which had to be filled up. Since sending fresh call letters, waiting for the new aspirants to join, etc., would have taken time—time lost for training—it was decided to shift some ten or twelve of us from the OTS to the main NDA. So, after just about three weeks at Madras, I was once again on a train, but this time bound for Pune. All these developments were, of course, unknown to my parents, or even to us for that matter, till we were peremptorily told to pack up and be ready to move the next morning. As a result, I remember little of my stay at the OTS, except that I did report sick once for a sprained ankle. It was just a sprain, a common occurrence among most fresh cadets on account of the sudden unaccustomed-to exercise. A crepe bandage and a couple of painkillers and it was back to training. There was no sympathy or mollycoddling.

We arrived at Pune in the early hours of the morning. The transport from NDA was to come only in the evening as per a laid-down schedule, so were told to stay put near the office of the Movement Control Officer (MCO). I don't remember whether I took anyone's permission or not, but since there was enough time to spare, I caught a bus and went home. My mother opened the door and saw one scarecrow in NDA mufti[2] standing at the doorstep. It took her an instant to recognize me before she burst into tears. She was certain that I had run away from the Academy, so gaunt had I become. I gorged on a good home-made meal (this time I didn't puke), which lifted both our spirits, me with a belly-full of food and my mother content to see her laadka. When I explained that I had been transferred to the campus at Khadakwasla, she was both relieved and happy. Much too soon it was time to head back and rejoin my coursemates (CM) at the station, lest I be declared AWL (Absent Without Leave).

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I was assigned to Juliet Squadron, and became 12188/J/56, Cadet MM Naravane, soon settling down and getting accustomed to the new place and routine. Our other CMs who had been at Khadakwasla from the start helped us in this transition. First-termers are at the bottom of the totem pole and are assigned all sorts of mundane chores, so one learnt the art of becoming as invisible as possible. NDA was also known for its 'ragging' or hazing, which all first-termers had to endure. I had read the book *Battle Cry* by Leon Uris, based on his own experiences of World War II, with the United States Marine Corps. The first part of the book is all about the hazing that newbies undergo and the rigours of Army life. I therefore had a fair idea of what was in store and was mentally prepared for it, knowing that it was a rite of passage. Not everyone was thus prepared. I recollect one of my CMs coming to me about a month into our first term and saying, 'Manoj, I can't take it any more.' I motivated him to hang on and not withdraw from the Academy, and I am glad to say that this person went on to become a Major General (two-star rank) in the Army. There are many views regarding ragging and whether it should be permitted or not. Officially, ragging is banned, and if a junior reports against a senior, it is almost always automatic relegation (for the senior) to the next junior course. Yet ragging goes on of varying intensity depending on the Commandant of the Academy. All I can say is that whatever we underwent helped develop *esprit de corps* among us. Ragging was never degrading but more physical in nature, meant to toughen you up both mentally and physically. It developed a bond between CMs that is lifelong, something our spouses roll their eyes at, as we relive our experiences at course get-togethers. Moreover, we bear no ill-will towards any of our seniors; in fact, they are our best friends.

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Life at the NDA was tough. The physical regimen aside, there was a fair deal of academics to deal with. I dare say that probably more cadets would have been relegated on academic grounds rather than on account of physical training (PT) tests. There are two streams at the NDA: a science stream divided into sections A to E, and a humanities stream with sections from 1 to 5. Since we were latecomers to the campus, we had to go separately to the academic department to get our streams allotted. Being a science student in school, I had opted for the science stream. I reported in turn to one of the assistants there, who on seeing my name, asked me in Marathi, '*Kiti takke milale*?' (What was your percentage? [score in the board exam]). I very proudly replied that I had secured a first division, with 64 per cent, no less. He looked me up and down, then at my marksheet and said, '*Saheb, tumhi mazha aika, non-science stream ghya*' (Sir, please listen to me, better take the non-science stream). He went on to explain that he had seen countless cadets, with even better grades, struggle with the twin demands of intense physical activity and academics and even toppers barely managed to pass. I went by his advice, and that's how, from a science student I became a humanities student and in hindsight, I can only say that I benefited greatly from this change. I narrated this story over tea to the administrative staff at the NDA, when I had gone there as Chief to review the passing-out parade of the 141st Course in October 2021, and they were greatly amused. My silent thanks to that person who gave me that most practical advice and because of whom, perhaps, I became the Chief.

I don't think that the ragging was too intense but apparently, somebody had kept a diary and shared that with his father who was a bigwig in the Services. We used to jokingly refer to it as the Odessa Files, after a movie that had been released at

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about the same time. That resulted in a crackdown on ragging, one of many such short-lived crackdowns. The outcome of this was that it was decided that there should be exclusive first-termer squadrons with only a few fifth- and sixth-term cadet-appointment holders to keep an eye on them. Alpha, Echo and Juliet Squadrons were earmarked for this, primarily because they faced the Cadets' Mess and thus more visible. The cadets of these three squadrons were equitably distributed among the others, and thus, along with JV Singh, Ashok Mukherjee and Nalin Tandon, I landed up in Lima Squadron. As a result, my course, 56th, ended up being the squadron juniors once again, just as we were relishing the prospects of becoming seniors. This arrangement of isolating the first-termers was fine on paper, but they couldn't be isolated from the overall environment. Accordingly, yet another change that took place was the creation of an NDA Wing at Ghorpadi, in Pune itself, where the first-termers would be sent to ease them in. So, the 58th Course reported to the NDA Wing, and since there was now spare capacity at Khadakwasla, all the cadets at the NDA Wing at the OTS, Madras were transferred here and the Wing at Madras shut down. All the cadets who had been distributed to other squadrons as part of the earlier reorganization went back to their original squadrons, but for some reason, the four of us remained in Lima. With the creation of additional infrastructure at Khadakwasla and the addition of Mike, November and Oscar Squadrons, the Wing at Ghorpadi was also subsequently shut down. The NDA now has Papa, Queen and Romeo squadrons also, taking the total up from the initial twelve to the current eighteen. During my tenure as the Chief, female cadets were admitted to the NDA for the first time. Interestingly, these female cadets who joined the NDA as part of the 120th course are housed in Romeo Squadron.

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There are three outdoor camps during the course of training; Camp Greenhorn in the second term, Camp Rover in the fourth and Camp Torna/Trishul in the sixth. The entire course goes out for four to six days, to practise the practical aspects of military training. Each of these culminates in an endurance run back to the Academy while navigating through pre-set waypoints. All the camps are also inter-squadron competitions with the endurance run, or 'Josh Run' as it is popularly known, carrying the maximum marks. We had done well in all the smaller competitions during Camp Greenhorn, coming first in tent pitching, night navigation, etc. Now, only the Josh Run, an endurance run of 10 miles (16 km) with full kit, stood between us and the first position. Alas, disaster struck. Somewhere en route we read the map wrong and got lost, losing valuable time. By the time we regained our bearings, the other squadrons had overtaken us. We were devastated. Perhaps we had become overconfident, having breezed through the night navigation exercise. Lesson learnt. In Camp Rover two terms later, we won all the competitions, including the Josh Run, and brought home the trophy. In the fifth term, along with all the routine training, we also branch out for our respective service training—Army, Navy or Air Force. The Navy guys learn sailing at the picturesque Peacock Bay; the Air Force guys learn gliding and take to the skies. The Army guys are taken to the nearest hillock and learn how to dig trenches and sleep in them. I say this not out of any rancour, but to bring out that it leads to an attitudinal change. Just because of this trifurcation, the same cadets who used to lead the pack were floundering in the sixth-term Josh Run. It was bewildering for me that I was now cajoling some of these Navy and Air Force CMs, even carrying their rifles or backpacks. Attitude is everything and decides the outcome even before you start.

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Every term has a mid-term break where cadets can either take part in some organized activity, such as a bike hike or go home to their parents or local guardians. In either case, written signed permission has to be obtained. Many of the cadets obtained this consent by signing it themselves or signing off for each other. This kind of fudging was frowned upon, more from the safety and security point of view, should some untoward incident occur. Since the consents usually came by post, the sheet would be creased along the folds, which was taken as an indicator of its genuineness. In my fifth term, I also applied for permission to go home during the mid-term break and submitted the parental consent. The Divisional Officer (DivO), a Navy Lieutenant, thought it was a forged consent and wanted me to own up, which in itself would have made me liable for disciplinary action. I steadfastly refused to admit to any wrongdoing. I was marched up to the Squadron Commander, Wing Commander PB Jadhav, where the DivO played his trump card. This is a forged consent, he said, because it does not have any folds or creases. I readily admitted to that, elaborating that I was a local, that my father had come to visit me the previous Sunday, the consent was indeed written in my hand, which my father had signed. The fact that my father had visited could easily be verified through the guest register, I added helpfully, not realizing that the DivO was most upset at being exposed. The Squadron Commander appeared sympathetic, but I guess he did not want the DivO to be let down, so the net result was that I was quite unjustly awarded fourteen days' restrictions.

Restrictions (as every officer knows) are a form of punishment involving extra drill in the daytime, an endurance run of 10-odd km in the afternoon and reporting at specified times during the day outside the Sudan Block, the main Administrative Block, much like a parolee reporting to the police station. This would

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be over and above the normal day's routine. Since I was under restrictions, there was no question of going home during the mid-term. Whatever spare time that I had during the mid-term break, I would go to the squadron anteroom to listen to some music. One afternoon, the Squadron Commander walked in while on his rounds and on seeing me, asked why I had not gone home on mid-term. I was quite taken aback since he was the one who had awarded me the restrictions just a couple of days earlier. When I explained why, he said never mind, I know you're not at fault and that notwithstanding my punishment status, I could proceed on mid-term leave for the balance of the days. In a flash, I was up and away and by evening, at my home in Anand Park.

When the term recommenced, the DivO obviously came to know that I had somehow managed to still go home. He really got after me as he felt I had somehow beaten the system. In no time at all, I had raked in twenty-eight more restrictions; fourteen for going on mid-term break without permission, and fourteen for not doing restrictions during the break. It was a double-whammy. At a total of forty-two restrictions in a single term, I was now in the category of incorrigible cadets, liable for relegation on disciplinary grounds. As part of the process, I was marched up to the Deputy Commandant, Air Commodore PD Dogra, for a final review, before going in front of the Commandant. Fortunately for me, the Deputy Commandant took a more balanced view and let me off with a stern warning. Perhaps the fact that he knew my father from his Air Force days played a crucial part in the matter. I was fortunate not to lose a term just because of misunderstandings but nevertheless learnt a crucial lesson of how to keep one's counsel and see the long game.

Academics was not my strong point, but I never let it get to me and I had some fun with my best friend Shaminder Kumar

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Chawla (Eskay to all). Eskay was in Bravo Squadron and hailed from Meerut, an alumnus of St Mary's School. He had three sisters, Lily and Bina older than him and Pammi a few years younger. We both used to be in Class 4 or 5 which is about as low as one can get on the academic ladder, with our cumulative grade point average (CGPA) hovering just above the passing grade. We had the same likes and dislikes, especially in music. We particularly liked a song called 'If I Were a Rich Man', by Chaim Topol from the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*, which had been screened at the Academy. In the lyrics there was a stanza:

I'd build a big, tall house with rooms by the dozen,
Right in the middle of the town.
A fine tin roof with real wooden floors below.
There would be one long staircase just going up,
And one even longer coming down,
And one more leading nowhere, just for show.

Once, in the English term paper, we had to write an essay on our favourite personality. While we chose different personalities, we conspired a bit. I wrote about the staircases saying my third staircase would lead to Eskay's staircase and Eskay wrote that his third staircase would lead to mine. Obviously, Mr Warrier, our English teacher, was not amused and threatened us with relegation for copying. But since we had chosen different personalities, we got away with it. We were equally fortunate on another occasion. This time it was in physics, which even the non-science stream had to do. I had scored a distinction in physics in the school board so this rudimentary physics was super easy for me. Not so for Eskay, who had been an arts student in school. So, we would always sit together during the exams. Once, while solving one of the numerical questions, I

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made a basic mistake. On seeing this, Eskay tried to point it out but I hushed him. The poor chap, thinking he was wrong since I was the physics 'expert', went down the same path. We were promptly hauled up for cheating, with Eskay clearly aggrieved at my pig-headedness of not heeding his warning. We looked suitably repentant as we stood before the instructor, Major Singh. We kept our mouths shut as he ranted and raved but ultimately let us off, saying that since both of us had got a big fat zero in that question, neither of us had really gained any unfair advantage. The fact that neither of us would say 'who' had copied from 'whom' and were ready to face the music together, I think, appealed to his sense of honour. We were saved from relegation yet again, due to a practical interpretation of the situation by the instructor, something I tried to apply myself throughout my career.

Once during my third or fourth term, I was fast asleep on a Sunday morning, having had a sumptuous breakfast, when someone knocked on the door to say that some guests from Pune had come to meet me. I looked out of the window and saw that it was my uncle, Dr Arawind Parasnis, a professor at IIT Kanpur, along with my cousins Kaushik and Gautam, as well as Veena and Uma. Guests were a welcome change from the routine but not at the cost of the Sunday afternoon siesta. I hastily put on some clothes and went down to meet them. We drove around the Academy and went to the picturesque Peacock Bay. Although I was happy to see Veena and my cousins, I was rather grumpy throughout on account of being woken up from my hibernation, something that Veena reminds me of even today.

The sixth term was quite uneventful as I kept a low profile and out of trouble, intent only on graduating with my course. Two incidents, though, stand out. We had international

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relations and area studies as one of the subjects, taught to us by Mr Dotiwala. In our sixth-term finals, one of the questions was about the internal situation in Pakistan and what would be the fate of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, former Prime Minister of Pakistan, who had been imprisoned following a military coup. I wrote an impassioned answer that international pressure and world opinion would not permit him to be hanged. When we exited the examination hall, the first thing we heard was that Bhutto had been hanged. So much for international pressure and world opinion, I thought, also wondering what grade I would get. Fortunately, in humanities, there are no right answers or wrong answers, only reasoned answers. As I write this, the war between Russia and Ukraine has entered its second year, and once again, international pressure and world opinion have proved to be useless.

The second incident, a rather unfortunate one, led to the person being withdrawn from the course, much like my father. Double Outdoors, i.e., drill followed by PT or vice versa are a dreaded feature of the timetable. Sometime towards the end of the sixth term, my CM, Cadet AM Sarda decided he wanted to sham a bit and reported sick with vague symptoms of chest pain. Unfortunately for him, the duty medical officer (DMO) took it seriously and referred him to the Command Hospital in Pune. Subjected to a battery of tests, it was discovered that he did indeed have a heart problem, which made him permanently unfit for the Services, and he was discharged just a month or so before the passing-out parade. Sarda went through all the *ragda*, strenuous PT and camps, only to be caught out at the last moment. He went on to make a mark for himself in the private sector so it is a case of sheer bad luck.

Soon it was time for the end-of-term activities and rehearsals, our passing-out parade. Parents and relatives

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come to witness the parade and are accommodated within the NDA itself. My father caught up with his former Air Force colleagues and they quite forgot that they had come for their sons' passing out. I had explained to my father where I would be in the line-up so he could take photos at the appropriate moments. Unfortunately, while we were forming up in the Fort, my position was changed and my father ended up taking photos of the wrong person. Later, when I asked my parents whether they had seen me, they replied that actually, everyone looked so alike that they couldn't make out at all. Thus ended my stay at the NDA, as anonymously as it had begun. My pen-picture in the NDA yearbook sums it aptly, 'Kool Comfy snuck in and out of the squadron like a shy bat.'

After a break of four weeks or so, it was time to report to the Indian Military Academy (IMA) at Dehradun. The reception centre at the IMA was in the Cariappa Battalion Cadets' Mess, manned by a few of the Platoon Commanders. After unloading our trunks from the 3-Ton truck, I reported to the desk, which was being manned by Captain Avtar Singh of the Kumaon Regiment. On seeing me, he asked me to first wear a tie and then come back. I pointed out that the chap next to me wasn't wearing one either. Capt Avtar ticked me off—that chap, he said, was a 'Direct Entry, reporting for the first time. You are an ex-NDA and ought to know better'. Capt Avtar, it turned out, was the CM of my cousin Sanjay Naravane, who was then posted with the 14 Infantry Division at Clement Town. I was assigned to Alamein Company, which along with Sangro Company, was in the main blocks, the erstwhile Collins and Kingsley Blocks from pre-Independence times. I now became 15804/Alamein/66, Gentleman Cadet (GC) MM Naravane. Interestingly, all of us Naravanes—my uncle

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Maj Gen AS Naravane, his son Sanjay, my father and now I—stayed in the Kingsley Block. Strange coincidence.

En route to the IMA, I stopped at Delhi to catch up with my old friends from AFCS days, especially Raju Pendse. I was staying with Veena at their Safdarjung Enclave house. As usual, Veena and I hit it off and she introduced me to some of her friends, Shailaja and Jayshree, from her school days at Carmel Convent. Veena was pursuing an integrated five-year master's in French at Jawaharlal Nehru University, and she introduced me to her university friends, Prerna, Neera and Jyoti. We went out together a few times too, or I would go to the JNU cafeteria in the Old Campus and have tea with them all. We went often to Palika Bazaar in Connaught Place, which was a hep place in the late 1970s–early 1980s with the song 'Noorie' playing incessantly over the loudspeakers, and to the tune of that song, Veena and I fell in love. Once I reached IMA, Veena and I started corresponding regularly.

The one year at the IMA was a whirlwind. Some jokingly call it *Mela* Academy—no one knows what's going on, akin to a country fair. The less charitable go so far as to say that you can put in a mule at one end and get an officer at the other, with no one being any the wiser. This, of course, is not so, but it was something for us cadets to crib about. The most exciting part of being in the IMA was being issued a service rifle for the first time, unlike the drill-purpose (DP) rifles we used to have at the NDA. This rifle was your constant companion, particularly during outdoor exercises and camps. The same rifle was to be used for firing, including the periodic classification firing tests, so one had to look after one's rifle most lovingly. At the end of the third term, GC HV Singh and I stood tied for the best firer and had to go down to the ranges in the Tons Valley for a tiebreaker. HV pipped me to the post and went on to win the General Shrinagesh Trophy for Best Firer.

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My cousin Sanjay was at Clement Town, married to Dipti, our neighbour from SO Flats, Chanakyapuri days, and they had an adorable two-year-old daughter, Tarini. On most Sundays, I would cycle down to their house, where we would have a glass of beer and then a delicious meal, mostly non-vegetarian. After a siesta, we would all climb on to his bike and go for long rides through the back trails, or up to Mohand Pass. After an early dinner, I would then cycle back in the dark, torch in one hand, pedalling furiously away so as not to be late for the final head count, which was at 2200 hours. One day, towards the middle of the third term, Sanjay asked me what (branch) I was opting for. I knew that I was going to opt for the Infantry but confided that I knew little of the various Regiments that comprise the Infantry. Sanjay said that I should opt for his, i.e. the Mahar Regiment, and that he knew the Aide de Camp (ADC) to Gen KV Krishna Rao, who was tipped to become the next Chief. He (the ADC) would ensure that I get his Battalion too, namely 6 MAHAR. To clinch his argument, he added, '*Donon field mein baith ke daru piyenge*' (we'll both sit in the field, i.e. on the borders, and drink). I thought that it was logical and did indeed opt for Infantry/ Mahar as my first choice in the Choice of Arms held a few weeks later. My second choice was the Rajputana Rifles, on account of their Regimental Centre being in Delhi, as I thought it would give me another opportunity to spend some time with Veena and her friends. This is how momentous career choices are made. As luck would have it, though I did get Infantry, I got neither of my choices—Mahar, Rajputana Rifles or Garhwal Rifles. The last was on account of Capt S Trikha of 3 GARH RIF, my Platoon Commander in Alamein who was very fond of me, being the only Infantry optee in his whole Platoon.

Capt Trikha had a strange way of showing his appreciation. In all the exercises and camps, the GCs are given exercise

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appointments, viz. Platoon Commander, Section Commander, etc. The exercise appointments are in the line of fire; they not only have to prepare and give out the orders or briefings, whether for defence or attack or the day's patrol or ambush but also have to cajole their CMs into digging field defences, fetch water (usually uphill) in 30-litre *pakhals* (mule tanks) from a distant water-point, food collection and myriad other tasks. Everyone is so tired that it's difficult to get anyone on their feet, let alone get them to work. These appointments are usually rotated daily so that everyone gets a chance to show their worth. During the mountain warfare exercise, Capt Trikha, for some reason, kept me on as the Platoon Commander for the entire duration. When I remonstrated at this unfairness, he replied that he was doing so because I was the only one worth investing in, being the only Infantry optee in the entire Platoon. Be that as it may, the result was that by the end of the third or fourth day, I was literally sleeping standing up, fuelled almost entirely by drinking sweetened condensed milk straight from the tin. I still have a fondness for condensed milk, which trait my daughters too seem to have inherited.

The Choice of Arms is a major exercise carried out for the soon-to-be commissioned GCs. The vacancies likely to be accruing in each Arm and Service are promulgated and then one can make an informed choice, keeping in mind one's performance and the number of other people vying for those slots. For almost 200 vacancies for the Infantry, only thirty-odd GCs had opted for the Infantry as their first choice. This came as a shock to the establishment, as Infantry, the Queen of the Battle, was where one could expect the best prospects. This was not acceptable and the whole Academy, not just the third-termers, was called in for a motivational talk to be given by (then) Capt GD Bakshi. He was, and still is, a die-hard

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Infantry-man and with his handlebar moustache, he cut a dashing figure. He extolled the virtues of the Infantry; how it is always in the thick of battle—his own brother had been killed in action in the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict—the rigours of field life and so on. After the lecture, while the others broke off, the third-termers were asked to fill up a fresh Choice of Arms. I do not know what was the outcome and how many more got motivated to change over to the Infantry, but we all know Maj Gen GD Bakshi (Retd) from his TV appearances—his moustache is still the same, except that it is white now, and draw your own conclusions, but the grapevine said that the number of optees dropped even further!

May 1980, Chetwode Hall, IMA Dehradun. Choice of Arms.
'No 15804 GC Manoj Mukund Naravane—is that right?'
'Sir.'
'Seventh Battalion, The Sikh Light Infantry,' (SIKH LI) said the Deputy Commandant, Brigadier YN Sharma.

I walked back to my seat in a bit of a daze amidst the bemused looks of my CMs. Manoj Naravane, the quietest person in the course, among those hurly-burly Khalsas? He'll surely get eaten alive! One of them, Rajat Das, leaned over and whispered, 'Excellent unit, it's at Gangtok, Sikkim. My father is the Brigade Commander there. Plays bridge with your Commanding Officer.' That lifted my morale—Gangtok, Sikkim—exotic locations full of adventure; exactly what I had joined the Army for. And as I pen down these words, that feeling of adventure still runs strong, although I am retired now, as do the words of my coursemate. In hindsight, I could not have got a better unit or Regiment. Lady Luck sent me to Lucky Seven.

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The passing-out parade on 7 June 1980 was attended by my parents, and this time, my father took pictures of the correct person. I had wanted Veena to come for the parade, especially since her father was posted at Dehradun, but they had gone to Pune for the summer holidays, so I would meet her there anyway. Along with my CMs, I walked past in slow march to the strains of 'Auld Lang Syne' into the portals of Chetwode Hall, over the plaque that says '*Antim Pag*' (Final Step), marking the culmination of one's training. The pipping ceremony that followed was equally emotional. We took a solemn oath '. . . *to bear true faith and allegiance to the Constitution of India as by the law established and . . . go wherever ordered by land, sea or air, . . . even to the peril of [my] life*.' Col Mayne, a SIKH LI officer, came up to my mother, and congratulating her, said that from that day onwards, I was theirs, i.e. the Regiment's, which brought fresh tears to her eyes, as she had not much liked the '*even to the peril of my life*' part of the oath. I was now IC 38750H 2/Lieutenant MM Naravane. The transition from civvies to uniform was complete.

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PART 2

Regimental Life

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2.1

Bole So Nihal, Sat Sri Akal

A few months after I had become a Major General, Hira (Lt Gen NPS Hira, PVSM, AVSM, SM, VSM [Retd]) and I were catching up on Regimental matters (he was the Colonel of the Regiment[1] then), when he remarked '*Jadon asi daru peende si, kadi lagya si ki asi jarnail banenge*?' (When we used to sit down to drink [as Young Officers], did we ever imagine that we would be Generals one day?) We shared a hearty laugh as we clinked glasses, but that set me thinking to the day I reported as 2/Lt (Second Lieutenant) MM Naravane to 'Lucky Seven' and the experiences I have had.

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Gangtok

After a two-week orientation period at the Regimental Centre at Fatehgarh, Uttar Pradesh, I reported to the unit at Gangtok, where we were part of 64 Mountain Brigade under 17 Mountain Division in June 1980. Lt Col Madan Das was the then Commanding Officer (CO), a fatherly sort of figure, with a twinkle in his eyes and a handsome moustache. I don't

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remember much of my initial interview, except that the CO seemed to be reading a novel while in office. The Adjutant was Capt AVS Ghuman, a stern officer who we youngsters were fearful of—even more than the CO. We were at the fag-end of our tenure and due to move from the icy heights of Sikkim to Bikaner, to the deserts of Rajasthan. In fact, the advance party had already moved to Bikaner, to 'take over' from the unit there, just like we were 'handing over' to the incoming unit at Gangtok. This 'handing/taking over' between units was and still is a most tedious, and more often than not, acrimonious process. The unit doing the taking over behaves like the 'boy's side' (in a wedding), making life difficult for the handing-over unit, which is like the 'girl's side', who wants to complete the process at the earliest and move out from a hard field (operational) area to a peace station and be with their families.

On joining the paltan, I was assigned to Alpha Company where Subedar Dilbagh Singh 'Communist' was the Senior JCO (junior commissioned officer). Why he had been nicknamed 'Communist', I never did figure out. Dilbagh Sahib (as the JCOs are respectfully addressed), was at the forefront of the handing/taking over for the Company. My role in the handing/taking over was to sign the rum *parchis* (requisitions) that Dilbagh Sahib used to present to me every morning, giving me some report in '*thhet*' (rustic) Punjabi to which I would nod my head knowingly. I hadn't the faintest idea of what he was saying or of what he did with the rum—how much was bartered, how much went down the hatch. All I know is that 'A' Company was the first to give the 'All OK' report of completion of the handing/taking over. Since we were on the way out, the Battalion had come back from the border and concentrated at Gangtok. As part of the handing over, I accompanied the CO to Nagchok, which had been one of our Company posts, in a

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high-altitude area. I also got my first view of Nathu La, on the border between China and India. I have been to Nathu La many times since that first visit, in almost every rank from Captain to General. Soon enough the handing over was completed and we were off to Bikaner by the middle of August, but not before some last-minute excitement. 2 SIKH LI was also part of the Division and deployed on the border. A large patrol of this unit comprising several officers, JCOs and men got disoriented in poor weather and wandered across to the Chinese side, where they were apprehended. All the personnel were repatriated after a few days, no harm done except for a few bruised egos, but it was a great embarrassment to all and created quite a furore.

Bikaner

At Bikaner, we were initially part of 8 (Independent) Infantry Brigade (Indep Bde), directly under the Corps. As part of some re-balancing, the Battalion was then placed under 322 Infantry Brigade, on the Order of Battle (ORBAT) of 12 Infantry Division (Inf Div). Shortly thereafter, 24 Inf Div was raised so we reverted to 8 Infantry Brigade but now under 24 Infantry Division. Rajat Das, whose father had been the Commander in Sikkim was the first General Officer Commanding (GOC) of this Division, so in a sense, we were back under him. All through this, while we remained at Bikaner, our operational role and Area of Responsibility (AOR) kept changing. As part of the Indep Bde, we were the Corps reserve; in 12 Inf Div, holding defences at Tanot in Western Rajasthan. In 24 Inf Div, we reverted to the reserve role, which could entail both offensive and defensive tasks. As a result, in one tenure, the Battalion gained rich experience in operations from the 'green' semi-desert area in the North around Sri Ganganagar/

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Anupgarh to the 'real' desert further South full of undulating and shifting sand dunes, shimmering in the sun. One such task was at Tanot, a Battalion node we needed to defend. When we first went there, we were orientated by indicating some landmarks, all of which had unique names. One particularly large barren dune had been named 'whale-back'. I marvelled at the imagination of the person who could see whales in the arid desert.

On reaching Bikaner, after a period of settling down, the entire Battalion was to go out into the desert for our initial orientation training. In preparation, the CO, Lt Col Madan Das briefed us all and in conclusion asked, 'Any points anyone?' Dilbagh Singh got up and suggested that we should also carry our rain capes (coats). The assembled officers and JCOs burst into laughter—but the last laugh was Dilbagh's when a few days into the exercise, there was a massive thunderstorm in which we all got drenched to the skin. While the rest of us hunkered down in our tents, Dilbagh Sahib strutted about wearing his raincoat like an imperial cape. The lesson? Always trust your subordinates and listen to the voice of experience. I had my first taste of the desert (figuratively and literally) in this training. The fine sand would blow like mist and get in everywhere, including the food, which would always taste crunchy. I also learnt the importance of always using and more importantly, trusting your compass and never going out without it.

Maj JS Kanwar was one of the Company Commanders, a most respected and professionally competent officer, from whom I learnt a lot. In the evenings, when he used to come to the Mess tent for dinner, he would set the bearing for his tent for the return after dinner. We used to find it quite amusing, as the tents were hardly a few hundred metres apart. I would come from my Company locality, which was about a kilometre

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away, a ten-minute walk and stroll back after dinner. One night as I walked back. I realized that I had been walking for a good fifteen minutes and still had not reached the Company location. When I looked around everything was pitch black and unfamiliar. I realized soon enough that I was lost in the desert, alone, and with no idea of where the Company was. The only light was that of the Mess lantern far in the distance. I ran back to the Mess as fast as I could before that light was extinguished. After that, the compass was my constant companion.

I do believe the CO had a soft spot for me and he took me under his wing. He taught me many an important lesson that has stood me in good stead, including maturity and discretion. We had just returned from our operational area of Tanot, where the Battalion had the task of occupying a forward node. The mine-field record forms had to be prepared and submitted to the Brigade Headquarters, a task that was getting delayed. I was dispatched to the Bde HQ clutching rolls of graph paper to report to the Brigade Major, an engineer officer.[2] I did not take kindly to his 'expert' advice and pointed out some errors, which obviously didn't go down well with the BM and I was 'kindly' shown the door. I stormed out and marched into the CO's office where Col Madan Das sat serenely, reading his novel and twirling his moustache. Even as I was heatedly explaining the turn of events, the telephone rang—it was the BM—and my heart sank. After listening for a few moments, the CO remarked '*Aa das, munde ne changa kam kitta na? Sahi toh kahe ryah. Phikar na kar samjha dunga*' (Tell me; hasn't my boy done a good job? He's right. But don't worry; I'll explain it to him). Hanging up the phone and asking me to sit down, he explained the facts of Army life. 'See,' he said, 'I know you are right, the work you have produced is of high quality. The BM is my coursemate and I have placated him, but remember,

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he is the Commander's right-hand man. What he says about you, me and the unit is what the Cdr will believe.' As I turned round at the door to salute, he was back at work—book in his left hand, twirling his moustache with the right.

One of the exercises we participated in during that tenure was Ex Digvijay, one of the largest exercises to have been held till then. It was a predominantly mechanized warfare exercise, meant to send a message to Pakistan. As part of the exercise, we advanced more than 45 km on foot over two nights to reach the objective area, navigating only by the compass—there was no GPS then. My immediate senior, Lt Vivek Ananthakrishnan, and I were in charge of the navigation. Two parties had been made by design, each under one of us, to be doubly sure. At the end of two days of night navigation, we hit the target within half a km of the planned spot, such was the proficiency we had acquired. During the day's enforced halt, sheltering below whatever little cover there was, the CO spread out his ground sheet and ordered me to go to sleep.

Bikaner was not just about exercises in the desert. As a peace station, the families of the married officers joined and we had several parties. A favourite picnic spot was on the Bikaner Lift Canal. The bachelors calling on the senior officers was a regular feature. Our favourite target for these 'raids', usually after midnight, was Capt JK Maindiratta. We would also call on Capt AVS Ghuman with some trepidation, but he was a most gracious host, his office scowl replaced by a warm welcoming smile. It taught us another lesson of how to separate the professional and the personal, and of how not to carry workplace tensions home that could affect the whole family. There were five of us subalterns—Vivek, Yogender Singh, Lajpat Rai, Ramesh Menon and myself. Yogender unfortunately had a severe back problem and left the Army to join the Haryana

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Police, from where he eventually retired as an Additional Director General (ADG). The senior subaltern was Lt NPS Hira, who had the onerous job of keeping us under control. The other officers present in the unit then were Capt Rudra Sen Sindhu and Capt BK Sharma. BK Sharma rose to the rank of Major General and is currently the director general, United Service Institution (USI) of India, a Delhi-based think-tank. Sindhu, a short service commission (SSC) officer left the Army much to our dismay on completion of his five-year tour and runs a successful business out of Gurgaon.

Veena and I had been corresponding regularly since my IMA days. Even after commissioning, I was spending much of my leave in Delhi. We were now going 'steady' for a long time and decided to get married. It is a custom in the Army to ask the CO's permission to get married through a formal application, which I wrote out by hand, dated 1 April 1983. By then, Col NM Verma had taken over the reins of the unit and I wasn't exactly in his good books. The timing of the request made him believe that I was playing an elaborate April Fool's joke, which indeed had been my intention. The unit was to move to field later that year, so we decided to get married on 30 June, a date that was decided arbitrarily by me. I thought it would be a good idea to start the training year, which commences 1 July onwards, with a bang. I left Bikaner for my wedding on two months' annual leave and rejoined only at the new location in the Chhamb Jaurian sector of J & K, which had been the scene of some fierce fighting in the 1971 war.

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Budhwal

The Battalion HQ was in a nondescript village called Budhwal, surrounded by paddy and mustard fields. We were part of

191 Inf Bde/10 Inf Div. Our defences were based on a linear obstacle system called the Ditch-cum-Bund (DCB). The DCB was a relatively new concept that had been introduced after the 1971 war. The Pakistanis had launched a surprise offensive here, spearheaded by their armour and with no obstacle to stop them, swept all the way to Jaurian on the approaches to Akhnoor. It was only due to some determined action by our own reserves that we were able to push them back, but Chhamb remained in their hands. Manning the DCB was therefore crucial to stop any such offensive, and we were supposed to know every kink and bunker of the DCB. Ahead of the DCB and up to the Line of Control (LC) is what is called the Forward Zone, occupied by several posts at the Company and Platoon level. The Company post in our Battalion area was called Sangam, because it was exactly at this point that the LC terminated and the International Boundary (IB) began.

I rejoined at Budhwal after my leave, where the Battalion had just reached about a week earlier. One morning, the CO asked Maj Thyagarajan Muthuswamy (Muthu) and me to go for familiarization with the DCB, walk along its length and identify the various bunkers, their locations, which of them needed repair, areas of the bund that had caved in and needed shoring up and so on. We started off in earnest but about halfway through, Muthu had a great idea. He had been told there were nice fat fish to be found in the waters that flow through the ditch, so why don't we try our luck? With that in mind, he had also carried his fishing rod which he quickly put together, baited it with a piece of roti left over from our mid-day meal and cast the hook into the waters of the ditch. We were sitting thus quite relaxed, dreaming of some nice fish curry for dinner when the CO materialized out of nowhere. Needless to say, there were fireworks, with Muthu getting the

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brunt of it being the senior officer. This didn't endear me to the CO either.

The next day, Maj Thyagarajan called me over to apologize. It was because of him that I had got into trouble, he said, adding that I should concentrate on my career and not be a 'lazy lout' like him with nothing much to look forward to. Of all the people who have advised me, I think I owe the most to Muthu. I had put in about three years of service by then, been promoted to Captain but had not really excelled anywhere. I had got a 'C' grade in the Young Officers' Course and was just coasting along with no real aim in mind, so it was indeed time to take stock. The next year, I appeared for the Part 'D' promotion exam, which is a mandatory requirement for promotion to Major. The examination has six papers, which can be passed in parts. It was not uncommon for officers to clear only one paper a year. It so happened that I cleared the Part 'D' exam, all six papers in one go, the first officer in Lucky Seven to achieve this feat in a long time. In fact, Veena was as incredulous as the others when I told her that I had passed in the first attempt. Later the same year, the team that I led came first in the Divisional Mine-Laying Competition, another first, as we hadn't had any podium finish in our three years at Bikaner. On the Imagery Interpretation Course for Officers (IICO), I qualified with an instructor 'I' grading. I realized that what Muthu had said was right. If I wished to, I could go places. Or perhaps, marriage had made me a better person.

Budhwal was a comparatively 'soft' field, where families could join for short durations. The officers' accommodation comprised two Tent Replacement Scheme (TRS) huts. These huts were constructed on a little mound about 50 to 60 metres away from the Officers' Mess along a small stone path slightly above ground level. The huts themselves were low-cost affairs,

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with no false roofing or plastering on the walls. Electricity was a flickering bulb, that too if the village feeder line was through. We all had our personal petromax lamp, which was looked after most lovingly. It was a source of both light and warmth in the winters, but a nuisance in the summers, attracting all manner of insects and making us sweat copiously. The TRS huts were supposed to have a life of five years but looked as if they had been around forever. There was no attached bathroom either and it was all dry sanitation, a hole in the ground in the 'bathroom' tent. To get the wives there was madness, but we did so anyways, to spend as much time together, because you never knew what fate had in store. Veena was still completing her final year at JNU, New Delhi, so she could join me only during the holidays. As Veena once put it, 'You really have to be in love', to put up with such primitive conditions.

It was during this tenure that two landmark interrelated events occurred. The first was the storming of the Golden Temple in June 1984, followed by the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards in October of the same year. Being in a Sikh unit, both events had to be handled delicately. Discipline had to be maintained but the sentiments of the men and the hurt they felt had also to be respected. Those six months were difficult times, but we negotiated it because of the strong familial bonds that the paltan had. Some basic precautions were taken. For example, the keys to the *kote* (armoury) and ammunition magazine were kept in the custody of an officer at all times and the duty officer would sleep on the kote premises at night. There was no Internet or social media back then, which was perhaps a good thing, but rumours abounded. The CO and Company Commanders regularly spoke to all the men, giving them the facts. The Gurudwara parade was done more seriously, with

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all officers attending without exception and the duty officers attending daily as a precaution against any false sermonizing. As a result of this, we did not have a single case of desertion or insubordination during this period. We all had to walk a fine line in an explosive situation.

When Indira Gandhi was assassinated, we were put on high alert, lest Pakistan take some advantage of this dastardly event. The Forward Zone was occupied in strength. The Company at Sangam was beefed up as were the Platoon posts on either side all along the LC/IB. In addition to Sangam, where an officer always stayed, one post on either side was also manned by an officer. I was manning a post to the North and 2/Lt Narendra Parmar, who had joined in June that year, was to the South of Sangam. One evening, about a month into our deployment, Narendra rang me up at about 2110 hours or so, to say that he was observing some unusual movement across the LC and had already counted about ten to fifteen lights coming towards the LC. I immediately shimmied up the tree that had a machan that served as my observation post. I too could see the lights of a single pair of headlights coming towards us from about two to three km away, approaching to about two km away and then disappearing from sight, to be followed by another set of headlights a little later. By the time I digested the situation, the sightings had crossed forty in number. Was this the enemy sneaking up on us one vehicle at a time? But then, with headlights on? This was way beyond our pay grade. I rang up the Company Commander and the telephone lines buzzed right up the chain to the Division HQ, who put the entire Division on 'Stand To', all posts to be manned in full strength round the clock. The numbers kept increasing from fifty to sixty to seventy, even as the Divisional Commander spoke individually to all of us. By the time the sightings stopped in the wee hours

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of the night, we had observed close to 200 such passes. We waited on tenterhooks for the dawn to reveal the situation. When the sun rose, we scanned the area on the other side and there was nothing, absolutely nothing to be seen. We had fully expected a jumble of vehicles hidden in the jungle on the other side—where else could the vehicles have been dispersed and camouflaged? We scanned each thicket and clump of trees repeatedly but to no avail. It was not our imagination either, so many personnel had seen the same thing. This remained a mystery till the end; perhaps it was just a tractor going round and round, but it demonstrated that we were alert and had not let our guard down.

Being in the middle of nowhere, the location had a variety of wildlife. Snakes, particularly vipers, were quite common, as were hyenas howling at night. Wild boars were common in the Forward Zone, especially on the Pakistani side. While patrolling or laying an ambush at night, more than the enemy, we had to be alert to guard against snake bites and getting mauled by these animals. On one occasion, when there were two such bite cases on two consecutive nights, the CO had to give an explanation, to which he could only reply that unfortunately, the hyenas were not subject to the Army Act and hence, not listening to his orders. Such is life, having to give explanations for doing your job.

This was also the time when the Siachen issue was brewing. It was all shrouded in secrecy, but all units were asked for officer volunteers for high-risk missions (HRM). There were plenty of volunteers, but then came another directive that the volunteers must be unmarried, which underscored how risky the missions were going to be. On account of this, many of us became ineligible and from the names forwarded to the Brigade, Narendra Parmar was selected. On the day he was to

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move out, I was proceeding on leave and the two of us travelled together to Jammu where I gave him a sort of farewell dinner at Asia Hotel, then the best hotel in Jammu. Over dinner, I jokingly told him that, if he came back alive, I'd treat him to dinner again. During his deployment at Siachen, Narendra's post was hit by an avalanche and he was trapped in the snow in a small air pocket till he was rescued after about four hours. He told me later that all through those timeless minutes, he kept going over my offer and hung on, saying again and again to himself, '*Sir se dinner lena hai*' (I have to have dinner with Sir). When I recounted this tale to my mother, she had tears in her eyes and she wrote a short story based on this account, which was published in a leading Marathi magazine, the payment for which she asked me to hand over to Narendra.

Binaguri

The command of the Battalion had passed on to Col Ashok Kapur, the first officer to be commissioned in Lucky Seven who also went on to command the same Battalion. This was the time when the command of Battalions had been upgraded from Lt Col to Col. Col Kapur's wife, Farida, was the daughter of Mr Dotiwala, who had been on the faculty of the NDA, teaching us international relations and area studies, and had even taught me. In fact, Col Kapur had met her when he had been posted to the NDA as an instructor. Because of this Pune connect, as also that we had the same taste in books and music, we always shared a special rapport. Soon after taking over the Battalion, he appointed me as the Adjutant when the post fell vacant when the incumbent officer, Maj BK Sharma, proceeded on another posting. It was under Col Kapur that we went to Binaguri, West Bengal.

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Binaguri was a military station in the middle of nowhere; it didn't even have a railway station of its own. Although classified as a peace station, there were no civil amenities in the vicinity, no proper schools or colleges nor cinemas or shopping centres. Although the military station itself was well laid out with basic amenities, including a military hospital, the sense of isolation was complete, made even more so by the hot and humid climate and dense undergrowth. For the slightest requirement, one had to drive to Siliguri about four hours away, on potholed village roads. Being a peace station, 100 per cent married accommodation had been catered for in the planning stage, but due to the lack of many facilities, not all families joined, especially those officers with children in senior classes. As a result, a great portion of the accommodation was vacant and houses not occupied were going to seed. This was a mismatch I was to see quite often, between expectations and ground reality, leading to wasteful expenditure.

At Binaguri, we were part of 66 Mountain Brigade under 20 Mountain Division, the reserve division of the Corps, with the operational role in Sikkim. Whenever required, we would move in convoys from Binaguri to our first-stage acclimatization area ahead of Gangtok on the road leading to Nathu La. As the reserves, we had several counter-attack (CA) tasks spread over North and East Sikkim. Being the reserve is a difficult job as compared to being deployed in a defensive role, but on the other hand, you get to see much more of the operational area. For each of the CA tasks, the officers would first carry out a reconnaissance and then make a plan catering for various contingencies. This would be followed by a skeleton exercise involving just the commanders and some specialist personnel. We would then have two full rehearsals for each task, once by day and once by night. Walking up and down those steep

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mountainsides at a high altitude was gruelling. We had more than a dozen such tasks to rehearse, so the days and nights used to pass by pretty quickly. Each individual plan had also to be recorded and slides made thereof to present at the Div HQ, as and when required.

For some reason that escapes me, as per the orders, slides for the overhead projector (OHP) had to be made on glass panes using indelible ink of various colours. Once prepared, the slide had to be covered with another glass pane to avoid any smudging and the two glass panes had to be stuck firmly together. Each slide in effect was like a glass sandwich. The responsibility for making these slides as well as their safe custody in storage and transit devolved on the Adjutant. A slight change in the plan, route or timing and that slide had to be junked and remade. This took up a disproportionate amount of time and was not really worth the effort. It was a classic example of 'style' taking precedence over 'substance'. Thankfully, that practice didn't last long but it taught me a lesson to be practical. In fact, when I grew in rank and started visiting units, I made it a point to listen to the briefings outdoors at the Battalion or Company viewpoints, with at best one map enlargement for the sake of orientation. This method was much better for assessing whether an officer or JCO really knew his job without having to refer to slides.

Since Binaguri was a relatively new station, detailed plans had been made for its beautification, including an arboriculture plan detailing what kind of trees and decorative shrubs should be planted at various places. Each unit had the responsibility of planting these saplings and ensuring their survival. The GOC of the Division would go around each morning on horseback making note of which saplings had withered and conveying his displeasure to the unit concerned. Our *Khalsas* (and I use the

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term with a great deal of respect, more as a term of endearment really), were unperturbed. Every morning before the physical training parade, they would yank out the offending withered saplings and replace them with small fresh twigs taken from the existing trees. This rigmarole used to continue for as long as I can remember but once again, I resolved that if and when my time came, I would not waste precious effort on such time-wasters.

Veena joined me in Binaguri and we had our first 'house' as a married couple, not counting the one- and two-room huts we had occupied from time to time. We did not have any luxuries, no fridge or TV, nothing except for a Bush two-in-one cassette player. No gas either and Veena had to cook on a kerosene stove. For someone who had grown up in metros, it was tough going and a big adjustment to make. We did have a pleasant interlude though, when the Battalion was sent temporarily to Darjeeling for internal security (IS) duties. Veena was carrying our first child, and it was glorious to sit in the sun, take long walks and sip on orange juice. Veena didn't stay long in Binaguri as the weather did not suit her, bringing on bouts of sneezing and asthma. Plus, the kerosene fumes were aggravating her morning sickness. For the better health of mother and child, Veena went back to stay with Rita (her mother) in Delhi. Our family time ended before it had even started, but as things turned out, it was for the best.

A short while after Veena had departed, I was sitting in the Adjutant's office adjoining the CO's office, when the head clerk walked in, saying that I had been shortlisted for a posting to 12 Corps, the raising of which was scheduled. This was a little unexpected, since Col Kapur had spoken to someone in the Military Secretary (MS) branch and had requested that since the unit had just moved to a new location, the team should remain unchanged for some time, and my posting, even if due,

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should be deferred. He spoke to his friend once again, and the matter was laid to rest. A few days later, we mobilized for the scheduled operational rehearsal and moved to our staging area near Chhangu Lake, somewhere closer towards Nathu La, at a height of about 10,000 feet. It was about end September–early October and already bitterly cold, with a faint dusting of snow on the mountain tops. In the snow tent that was our Mess, Col Kapur came in one evening waving two posting orders, both for me, to two different places. He was fuming, because despite his request, not one but two postings had been issued, albeit by different sections of the MS branch, one as GSO 3 (Int) to 12 Corps and the other as training officer to the Regimental Centre. Talk about the right hand not knowing what the left hand was doing. Showing me both the orders, he had asked me for my choice but in all fairness, never tried to cancel either of them. I had said then that I would go wherever he felt was best, and after a moment's reflection, he said that I should go to the Centre. I was a little disappointed; GSO 3 (Int) was the more glamorous appointment, but having put my fate in his hands, I accepted his decision, which I have never regretted.

I handed over the house to Captain Ashok Sahrawat but continued to stay with him and his wife Usha and daughter Mamta, who was about two years old at the time, and made ready to depart. I was feeling a bit under the weather one day; I had excused myself and was fast asleep in the guest bedroom when Usha knocked on the door and handed me a slip of paper with a single word 'Kxxxxh'. I groaned in disbelief—not today of all days, gimme a break. But there it was and I had no choice but to change into uniform because all the activities that revolved around that code-word required my presence.

In November 1986, the Indian Army launched Operation Brasstacks, part of a series of exercises to simulate the operational

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capabilities of the Indian armed forces. It was the largest mobilization of Indian forces on the Indian subcontinent, involving the combined strength of two Army commands. More than half a million men comprising ten Divisions and three Brigades were involved, more than any NATO exercise or national exercise since World War II.[3] This obviously sent alarm bells ringing in Pakistan, who, fearing a blitzkrieg-type attack to dismember them, mobilized their own army. As part of the operational plans, it was also decided to mobilize the Dual Task Formations (DTF), those Divisions having a primary role in the Eastern theatre and a secondary role in the West. Exactly the opposite had been done in the 1971 war, when the DTF from the West had been moved to the East, so the Pakistanis were a worried lot. 20 Mountain Division was one of those DTFs.

Every unit has a mobilization scheme, a thick leather-bound book, which gives out in the minutest detail what actions are to be carried out, by whom and by when. The whole train of events is set in motion by issuing the codeword for mobilization, which is known to all. For our unit, that code word was Kxxxxh. As the Adjutant, it was my responsibility to monitor the entire mobilization, stepping in whenever required to coordinate. One of the first tasks was to summon the bugler to give out the special bugle call denoting an alert. These days, the same can probably be done through a single SMS on a common user group (CUG), but those were the days when even landline phones were scarce commodities. Within six hours, the advance party had been dispatched to God knows where and the rest of the Battalion, the main body, was to follow twenty-four hours later. I have never seen a Military Special train, known for its snail's pace, travel at such speed, with only two halts in the day. One in the morning to issue breakfast and

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packed lunch and the second at night for dinner, the halts being also used for topping up on water. Less than forty-eight hours later, we were at Ferozepur, where the tension was palpable with all indications of imminent hostilities. Here too everybody claimed that we had been allotted to them, so we were preparing to occupy defences one week and readying for an offensive the next. It was rather challenging to understand the situation and even more so to explain the new orders to the men almost daily. It did not exactly inspire us with much confidence.

This period of high alert lasted till about mid-February 1987, and it was only then that postings which had been held in abeyance were allowed. In a way, it was good that Veena had left earlier itself because, between her leaving and my posting, I had hardly stayed at Binaguri at all. In all this commotion, at least I knew she was safe and well-looked-after in Delhi. It was under such circumstances that I was given a hurried farewell 'dining out' and proceeded on posting to Fatehgarh, my first outing away from my paltan, my family.

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2.2

To Foreign Shores: From Regimental Centre to the IPKF

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En route to Fatehgarh from Ferozepur, I halted at Delhi during my joining period to spend time with Veena who was well along in her pregnancy, with the baby due in March. Veena was the epitome of discipline; proper meals, no late nights and an hour's walk every evening without fail. It was good to be with Veena, not having been with her ever since she left Binaguri. Although I could not be present, I was not worried since Veena was with her mother Rita, who was herself very grounded and a no-nonsense type. My father-in-law, Shridhar Kaka as I called him, was there too, a gentle soul, who without interfering, was always present. Someone you could bank on. All too soon it was time to leave for Fatehgarh. I was not sure whether after joining in the second half of February, that too after the Ex Brasstacks delay, I would get leave in March, within a month of joining the new assignment. Rita told me not to worry and that she would keep me informed of all developments. I caught the Kalindi Express from Old Delhi Railway Station, bound for

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Farrukhabad, the nearest railway station (NRS) on the broad-gauge line, from where it was a forty-five-minute drive to the Sikh Light Infantry Regimental Centre (SLIRC).

Fatehgarh is a small cantonment on the Southern bank of the River Ganga, housing besides the SLIRC, the Rajput Regimental Centre (RRC) and a Territorial Army Battalion. The SLIRC was not always in Fatehgarh, having moved there only in 1977. Earlier, it used to be at Meerut, along with the Punjab and Sikh Regimental Centres and the Remount Veterinary Centre and School. As a fallout of the 1971 war, it was decided that administrative units such as training centres should be moved to the hinterland and operational formations—Divisions and Brigades—moved closer to the border for faster mobilization. Fatehgarh was chosen for the SIKH LI because, during British times, the Sikh Pioneers (the forebears of the SIKH LI) had once camped at the Fatehgarh Fort. The RRC was not too happy with this development, since they had to share their barracks and training areas with the SLIRC and could no longer rule the roost. The initial few years were quite acrimonious, with the Commandants not on talking terms, but with changes at the top as part of routine turnover, relations improved, though a strong competitive spirit and professional rivalry persisted.

The Commandant of the Centre was Brig KM Tewari, who had also commanded Lucky Seven. I had heard many tales about him right from my NDA days when he was the Battalion Commander of No. 2 Battalion, as well as in the unit. He was an extremely sharp officer and nothing escaped his attention. After the customary interview, I went and reported to Col Moti Singh, the CO of the Training Battalion. One of the first things I told him was about Veena being in the family way and put in my request for some leave in March, which

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was immediately sanctioned. Col Moti Singh was, and still is, a large-hearted person, full of life, and there was never a dull moment when he was around. With my main worry out of the way, I could properly concentrate on my job as the training officer-cum-staff officer to the CO. My job as the training officer was to implement the training programme made by the GSO-1 (Training) at the Centre HQ, ensuring that the training Platoons reached their appointed classes as per the schedule, lesson plans were updated and followed, training aids were available in adequate numbers, etc. Whenever there was firing planned at the long range, I would be there the whole day, it being mandatory for an officer to be present at all times. On other days, I would go around the various training areas—the field craft/battle craft to the weapons training or the drill square to keep an eye on the training. It was fine in winters, but doing so in the summer months with strong, dusty, gusty, hot and dry summer winds and hot breeze—the famous north Indian 'loo'—was torture. Training would start in the early hours of the morning and end by about 1130 hours as a precaution against heat stroke. Those were simple and carefree days, teaching the fresh young recruits how to march and hold a rifle, demonstrating various firing positions and how to crawl undetected from cover to cover—the various small things I had learnt as a cadet at the NDA and IMA. Each day, I would come back with a quiet sense of satisfaction of having done my job.

As sanctioned, I proceeded on leave to Delhi and our daughter, Isha, was born on 23 March 1987. I was there to drive Veena to the hospital, New Delhi Nursing Home in Green Park, not far from our house in Safdarjung Enclave. We had selected this hospital because that's where my sister-in-law Anita (Nitin's wife) had her baby, and the doctor, Urmil Sharma, was known to her. I'm sure every parent experiences the same

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emotions, but holding Isha in my arms was a wondrous feeling. We had already decided on the names, Isha for a girl and . . . I've forgotten really what it was for a boy. Angad perhaps, after Guru Angadji. The next two weeks were a different kind of learning process. Nobody teaches you to be a parent; you learn on the job. Learning how to change a diaper, fastening it with a curved safety pin, was as difficult as *khola-jodna*, stripping and re-assembling a rifle. Disposable diapers were not in vogue yet, so washing soiled diapers, and drying and folding them was a daily chore. A stack of folded diapers was a lovely, oddly satisfying sight. The days passed by much too soon and it was time to rejoin the Centre. It was tough to leave them both, with her parents, the only solace being that Veena and Isha would be joining me as soon as I was allotted married accommodation.

Fatehgarh was a tough peace station, the main issue being very poor power supply. There was only one HT line supplying the garrison, colloquially called the *gyarah hazaar line*, the 11,000 Kw line, which was the main feeder to the station. The transformer it fed into would 'blow up' at regular intervals. Whenever that happened, a new transformer had to be brought in from somewhere, and this whole process took three to four days. Four days and nights without electricity were taxing, to say the least, and enough to drive everyone crazy. The office complex had a diesel generator (DG) as did the Officers' and JCOs' Mess, but that was it. When we broached the subject of getting a generator for the officers' accommodation, Brig Tewari was very firm. First, all the men's living lines (barracks) should have generators, he said, only then will we get generators for ourselves. We groaned inwardly, thinking that this would never happen, but he was true to his word, making use of all avenues, public and Regimental funds, and by the time I was to leave the Centre two years later, each of the officers' complexes had a

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generator each. This simple adherence to keeping the interests of the men first and foremost left a deep impression on me.

A little later, there was some official work to be done in Delhi. The work was of a little sensitive and slightly unpleasant nature and would normally have been done by someone more senior, as it involved escorting an officer (senior to me) under armed guard to the Base Hospital at Delhi. The Commandant though, looked at it differently. When he had finished explaining the complexities of the job, he said that once I had finished the work, I could take a few days off before returning. That was music to my ears and Veena got a nice surprise when I turned up unannounced a few days later. By then, both Veena and Isha were well enough to travel and we all returned together to Fatehgarh, to a new house that had just been allotted to me. One of the first things we did was to buy a fridge, an inescapable necessity to keep the milk fresh. We didn't have enough money to buy one outright, so we bought it on instalments from a dealership in Farrukhabad, run by Kuku Singh, a Sikh gentleman. I also secured a gas connection and we bought a two-burner stove from the gas agency. Little by little, we built up our household, saving whatever we could to fund our next purchase. I had the joy and pleasure of seeing Isha grow up and being there for every milestone, from turning over to sitting up, from crawling to standing. The baby babble and first words. I thanked my stars that Col Kapur had sent me to the Training Centre with its relaxed routine, rather than the hurly-burly of an active formation, that too a new raising. Perhaps the fact that he too had been at the Regimental Centre, gave him the vision of what would be best for me.

Soon after joining me at Fatehgarh, Veena was offered a job as a primary teacher in the Army Public School, for a princely salary of Rs 350 per month. Although Isha was only

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a little over three months then, we decided that Veena should go ahead. Situations will never be ideal and we would work things out; if things didn't work, she could always quit. We hired a maid-cum-babysitter, and so began Veena's career as a teacher. She even acquired a BEd degree, and over the years, worked in prestigious schools all over India. St Mary's, Pune; Sophia's, Meerut; Bloom, New Delhi; as well as international schools in Yangon, Myanmar and Colombo, Sri Lanka. The fact that I was the training officer helped because, in the ten-minute break between classes or the tea break, I would swing by, change Isha's diaper and prepare her bottle of milk or cereal. That way, Isha was never alone with the maid for more than two hours or so. We would often ask our parents to come stay with us, which they did unhesitatingly. In fact, setting their own comforts aside, they would come singly, so that at least one parent was with us most of the time. My father would take Isha out for daily walks in her pram while we were both at work, and they became a familiar sight in the Cantonment.

After I had been at the Centre for a year or so, the Centre Adjutant, Capt H Bahadur, proceeded on permanent posting and I was appointed Adjutant in his place. This move brought me to the Centre HQ and directly under the Commandant. It also got me closer to the Records Office, where all the documentation of the men is done. A separate folder was maintained for each soldier from the time of his enrolment to retirement, tracking his every move and promotion, marriage, children, right up to his date of retirement and beyond. Even after his death, since his wife would be entitled to a pension, the records had to continue to be maintained, so it was not uncommon for the records to span a hundred years. It was a tedious task done manually based on inputs given by the units in the form of Part II Orders. It was based on this that the pay

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and accounts office would then calculate the emoluments due to each jawan, which was sent to the units in the form of a quarterly statement. Seeing how the 'back-end' works made me appreciate the importance of getting the documentation done in a timely and accurate manner. If ever there was one area that could benefit from automation, this was it, and I was to be part of the automation project nearly three decades later.

The Adjutant of any unit is expected to demonstrate the highest standards of discipline and turnout. My summer uniform had got quite faded in the sun but was not frayed enough to discard. I thought I could get it dyed at a nominal cost rather than getting a new one stitched, since we were hard up for funds. The dyed uniform looked good but was of a darker blackish shade than the regular olive green. I wore it with some trepidation and went to the office as usual, receiving the Commandant on his arrival and interacting with him throughout the office hours. I fully expected him to say something about my uniform and was relieved he hadn't. When it was time to leave, he asked me to accompany him in the staff car, instructing the driver to go to the Officers' Mess. When we reached there, the rest of the officers were waiting at the bar. Drinks are on the Adjutant, he informed everyone, for wearing a dyed uniform. If I had thought he had not noticed, I was sadly mistaken. What a novel and gentle way to chastise someone, also conveying at the same time, a subtle message to the others too. Fortunately, it was only one drink per head, otherwise, my bar tab would have been more than the cost of a new uniform!

In July 1987, the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord was signed, which sought to end the Sri Lankan Civil War between Tamil militant groups such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) among others, and the Sri Lankan Government. Under the

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terms of the agreement, India was to station its troops in the Northern (Jaffna) and North-eastern (Trincomalee) provinces of Sri Lanka, to keep the warring factions at bay. This force, known as the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), began to deploy in Sri Lanka soon thereafter, with the operation being nicknamed Operation Pawan. The agreement was not received favourably in Sri Lanka, where it was seen as a bit of arm-twisting by India and a military intervention under the guise of a peace-keeping force. 54 Infantry Division from Secunderabad was the first to be inducted, followed by 72 Infantry Division from Gwalior, getting deployed in Northern (Jaffna) and Eastern (Trincomalee) provinces, respectively. Because of these developments, the unit's tenure at Binaguri was truncated and we were slotted to move to Sri Lanka in the latter half of 1988, under 72 Infantry Brigade of 36 Infantry Division. As soon as I came to know of this development, I rang up Col Ashok Kapur, volunteering to rejoin the paltan without completing the stipulated two-year tenure at the Centre. Col Kapur was to move out shortly as the military assistant (MA) to the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief (GOC-in-C) of Southern Command, Lt Gen AK Chatterjee.[1] He advised me that I should complete my tenure, since I had only about six months or so to go up to March 1989 and join in the normal course. However, he would sound out the incoming CO, Col NK Banerjee, who could take a fresh call.

Meanwhile, I was earmarked to attend the Junior Command (JC) course at the Army War College, Mhow. The JC course is not only an important career course but it also lays the foundation for the Defence Services Staff College (DSSC) course. While the JC course is mandatory for all officers, the DSSC one is through a stiff competitive exam. It was important to do well in the JC course, so I had taken a spot of leave to

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prepare for the course. Once Veena had left for work, I would sit down to study, sitting Isha down on the study table itself. She would scribble on a sheet of paper, and I would scribble down my notes. I had got a set of pink-coloured notepads made, in which to make notes, and these became quite popular among the officers earmarked for subsequent courses. I daresay that my notes 'attended' the JC course at least half a dozen times, being passed on from one officer to another, often without my knowledge, and I had the devil of a time retrieving these notes when it came down to studying for the DSSC exam. I did well on the course, securing an A(I) grade, which once again boosted my confidence in myself. I was fortunate to have had excellent instructors in (then) Col Mohinder Puri and Col Suryavanshi, who extracted the best out of us.

By the time I returned from JC, my tenure was coming to an end, so rather than taking over the duties of Adjutant again, the Commandant made me a kind of officer on special duty (OSD), to follow through on his key result areas (KRA) and push through projects that were either lagging behind or mired in red tape. One such project was the Regimental Museum, the siting of which was done in such a manner as to save the maximum number of trees, and truckloads of mud had to be got in to create the mound on which the museum stands today. Another project was to resuscitate the billiards table, which, for some reason, had remained packed for a decade, ever since the Centre had moved to Fatehgarh. This 'discovery' led to a flurry of searches in all the storerooms throughout the Centre, which yielded many riches. In all units are such *khazanas*, treasures that somehow get overlooked or forgotten and more often than not, decay in storage.

When the IPKF had initially gone into Sri Lanka, they were welcomed by the predominantly Tamil population of the

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North and North East. The IPKF were seen as saviours, acting as a buffer between the Sri Lankan Army and various militant groups. The mandate of the IPKF was to disarm all the militant groups, including the LTTE, the most powerful of them all. Once this had been done, an interim council was to be formed, followed by the conduct of provincial elections. Relations soured, however, when seventeen LTTE cadres died while in custody of the Sri Lankan Army, for which the LTTE blamed the Indian Army and refused to cooperate further. Overnight, friends became enemies and the LTTE and the Indian Army got locked into mortal combat, with the local population also turning hostile. Initially, the IPKF was on the back foot, having been caught off-guard by this sudden turn of events. However, over the course of a year or so, by trial and hit, the IPKF managed to get the situation somewhat under control, restoring a semblance of law and order, at least in the major cities and townships. The jungles however, remained under the control of the LTTE, from where they would continue to launch attacks on our camps, ambush our patrols or otherwise disrupt our convoys, by planting improvised explosive devices (IED) on the roads. Watching from the sidelines was the Sri Lankan Army, who, through this unexpected turn of events, now had the IPKF doing their dirty work. That was the general situation when I landed up in Trincomalee in April 1989.

After leaving Veena and Isha behind at Fatehgarh, I went to Delhi to meet my in-laws, then to Pune to meet my parents, using the layover to also apply for separated family (SF) accommodation at Pune.[2] From there it was by train to Madras (now Chennai) and by Air Force courier, an AN-32 aircraft to Trincomalee. I was picked up at the airport and taken via the 4th Mile Junction, where the road bifurcated towards Batticaloa, to the Battalion HQ at Trincomalee

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Railway Station. En route were scars of the fighting that had taken place, roofless houses with gaping windows charred by fire. The odd burnt vehicle stood abandoned by the roadside. Amid the seeming calm and hustle-bustle of city life, it was a stark reminder not to let one's guard down. Rail services had long since been suspended and the railway station, its platforms and sidings housed the Bn HQ. The station master's office had become the CO's office-cum-residence, the waiting rooms dormitory-style accommodation for the officers and JCOs. On the other side of the tracks were sidings with large sheds that became the men's living lines. It was all very makeshift and not quite the tourist haven Trincomalee was known to be. I was given a field promotion to the rank of Major and assigned to Bravo 'B' Company, which was deployed along the Inner Harbour Road, overlooking the beach. The other Companies were spread out all over the town, including at the erstwhile residence of the Governor, which was located on a headland with a majestic view of the Bay of Bengal.

Capt Lajpat, who as a Major, had been the Company Commander before me, became my company officer and took me around, explaining the role and tasks of the Bn in general and the Company in particular. This dropping down from Major to Captain was not uncommon in those days. If a vacancy existed, the senior-most Captain was given a field promotion to Major; if someone more senior came along, that officer picked up his acting rank of Major, and the juniormost reverted to the substantive rank of Captain. This was well known to the officers but rather confusing for the men who would mutter to themselves, '*Sahibji ne zarur kuch kitta hona*' (Sir must have surely done something wrong). Capt Lajpat explained to me where all the picquets had to be placed on a daily basis, the vulnerable areas that needed to be guarded and the flashpoints

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for incidents of a communal nature. Lajpat also introduced me to the prominent locals of the area, whom we could call in case of need. One such person was Dr K Hemchandra, on Vidyalam Road, a well-known and esteemed figure who was respected by all—the militants, the Sri Lankan Army as well as by us, and some of us are still in touch with him. After handing over to me, Lajpat returned to the HQ to take over as the Adjutant, and Captain Ramesh Menon became my Company 2iC.

The Company HQ was located on the top floor of a girl's school, which was functioning on a reduced scale. Opposite the HQ was the shop of the 'Chinaman', a vendor who had all the latest in foreign goods, sourced from God knows where. From TVs to VCRs (they were the craze then) to music systems; to chocolates and perfumes; decorative items of all kinds; Danish cookies and coconut milk; even gold coins. You name it, he had it. It was like a mini duty-free shop. All ranks would make a beeline to this shop before proceeding on leave, buying whatever they could afford. Sales were high, spurred no doubt by the two beautiful salesgirls, rumoured to be his daughters. On this account, we, i.e. Bravo Company, had to make sure that there was no untoward incident at the shop, no firing or IED anywhere around nor any cases of theft or arson. The days and nights were an endless round of maintaining the highest level of alertness and security, leaving no time to appreciate either the beauty of the bay, or the beauties on the beach.

My class fellow-cum-coursemate Nandu Koregaonkar was also in Trincomalee. His unit,1 PARA (SF), had been one of the first units to be inducted and had carried out countless operations and suffered many casualties. Nandu had been seriously injured himself, when during a search and destroy operation, a Claymore mine had gone off, spraying him with shrapnel and injuring him critically. After recovering from his

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injuries, he was now back on active duty. When he came to know that I was in Trincomalee, he called me over to his HQ, where he gave me some life-saving tips on how to operate on the island. 'Whatever you do,' he said, 'don't ever walk on a jungle trail, because that's where the mines are.' Better to bash through the jungle, even if it meant taking a longer route or more time. The easy route was the route to death. For his action in that operation, Nandu was awarded the Sena Medal (Gallantry). He still has pieces of shrapnel in his body, which make the metal detectors at the airport go 'beep-beep-beep' every time he passes through, a constant reminder of when he hung between life and death.

About a year after the Bn's arrival, the situation in Trincomalee stabilized. Given the improved situation within the town, it was felt that a Company could be redeployed to the outskirts, dominating the jungles leading to Trincomalee. This was barely two months after my reporting to the unit. Accordingly, Bravo Company was moved to the 4th Mile Junction, with the Company HQ and one Platoon at the 4th Mile Post itself, and two Platoons about 5 km further eastwards along the Batticaloa (Batti) road, near a village called Villamkulam. There used to be a causeway across the harbour, connecting Trincomalee in the North via Mutur to Batticaloa to the South, which had been destroyed in the fighting between the SLA and the LTTE. As a result, all convoys now had to take the Batti Road and go all the way around. This road had the reputation for being extremely prone to IED attacks and needed to be sanitized by road opening parties (ROP) before any movement was allowed. The road was equally important for the SLA, which had posts strung out at regular intervals, with their Bn HQ at the Monkey Bridge Camp, then occupied by the 4th Battalion Sri Lanka Light Infantry. This 'Light

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Infantry' connection helped us build a rapport with them early on. Their CO was Lt Col SHS Kottegoda, one of the rare Tamil COs in a predominantly Sinhala Army, and their 2iC was Maj Shane Balthazar, a Sri Lankan burgher of Dutch origin. Since all operations were now the responsibility of the IPKF, we had to carry out the ROP, notwithstanding the fact that there were SLA posts all along the road.

The post at the 4th Mile was in a dilapidated house that used to belong to a Tamil merchant who had since fled or been killed. It was a sprawling, two-storeyed wooden structure on the slope of a hill. There was a small room to the rear on the second floor which served as the officers' accommodation with the luxury of an attached toilet. On top of the hill was a civil water point, where a picquet would stand guard by day to prevent any firing on the post from this dominating height. To prevent being surprised at night, some anti-personnel mines and booby traps had been placed further up the hill by the previous unit. As part of the handing/taking over, Ramesh had been shown the location of the mines and IEDs. When I joined a day or so later, I too wanted to see overall security arrangements, so we went up once again to the top of the hill, an NCO leading the way. Being new to the location, the NCO misjudged the distances and accidentally activated the tripwire of our own IED booby trap. There was a loud click as the striker hit the detonator and breathless silence as we stood glued to the spot waiting for the inevitable blast. The seconds ticked by, none of us wanting to be the first one to move for fear of causing the IED to explode. After what seemed an eternity, we cautiously took a few steps back to safer ground. Lady Luck was smiling at us that day. However, it showed that the defensive measures that had been put in place had deteriorated with time and become ineffective, so we retrieved all the old mines and IEDs and put fresh ones

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in their stead, marking each location with the utmost care and accuracy. We mightn't be so lucky the second time around.

The post at Villamkulam was in an abandoned farmhouse. The roofs of the buildings had long gone and had been replaced by thatched roofs made of coconut fronds. This was fine to keep the sun out but leaked at many places whenever it rained, which was most of the time. At some time in the past, the area astride the road had been cleared for about 50 m on each side by the SLA. Mature teak trees had been brought down and the undergrowth cut so that no one could fire from close range on the convoys plying on the road. Logs from these trees had been placed around the post to form a defensive perimeter. As at the 4th Mile Post, all the old mines were retrieved, this time without any gut-wrenching incidents and replaced with new ones, especially towards the jungle side. Sentry posts were established all around and manned 24x7 by light machine guns (LMG). On the roof of the farmhouse was a water tank, over which the medium machine gun (MMG) was placed, covering the approaches from the jungle and also serving as the observation post. It was all very rudimentary and would not have held up against a sustained attack.

From these two locations, we used to send out the ROPs whenever ordered, which was about twice a week. From Villamkulam, one party used to go towards the Company HQ and marry up with the party that had come from that side. The other would go further West, up to the SLA Bn HQ and marry up with the party of (**) GR[3], which would have come from even further West over the Monkey Bridge, an old iron structure. Each and every move of ours was under the observation of the locals who served as the eyes and ears for the LTTE. We could not allow ourselves to fall into any set pattern that could be exploited. Unfortunately, our neighbouring unit was not

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as cautious. At the end of the day, the ROP would fall back and get together at a central place and then board a truck in order to avoid the walk back. One day, the LTTE targeted this truck itself, since the ROP was no longer effective, and caused many casualties. It was a big blow and a shock to all—it could easily have been us. Mixing a misplaced sense of welfare with operations had cost those jawans their lives, a lesson that stood me in good stead when I became a CO. After that, we were even more careful to not follow any pattern in our operations and never ever sat in the same position or under the same tree twice. After this incident, it was decided that we should be the ones doing the ROP right up to the Monkey Bridge. Since the major effort was now up front, the Company HQ also moved ahead to Villamkulam.

Life at Villamkulam was an experience in itself. The sanitation arrangement comprised a deep trench latrine (DTL) right next to the perimeter. When one DTL got filled up, another was dug up and small screens were put up to give a semblance of privacy. Being right next to the perimeter, there was every possibility of getting sniped at while doing the 'job'. Caught with your pants down, so to speak. Equally possible was for someone to have sneaked in and booby-trapped the DTL itself. Hence, as a matter of routine, the area of the DTL and up to 100 m beyond the perimeter was cleared every morning and everyone did his 'job', officers included, under the watchful eyes of the sentry seated atop the water tank. Sometimes, one or the other IEDs placed for early warning would go off with a loud bang, always at night. On hearing the loud explosion, we would all tumble out of our beds and run or crawl to the perimeter and man our 'stand-to' positions, the action stations. The LMG nearest the location would fire a few bursts of speculative fire in that general direction, even as we strained to see any signs of

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an impending attack on the camp. We would stay thus, half-dressed, with one shoe on and one shoe off, until daybreak. A thorough search of the area next morning would sometimes reveal the carcass of a deer or leopard as the cause of all the excitement. If a deer, it was brought back to the camp and used to supplement our rations.

Sometime in betwixt, Major Adolf S. Pinto, of 10 SIKHLI, was posted to the unit. He became the Company Commander of Bravo Company, and I reverted to my Captain's rank to become his Company 2iC. Pinto, although just a year or so senior to me, had an excellent grasp of Company administration and I learnt a lot from him, which came in handy later when I became a full-fledged and permanent Company Commander. Pinto and Subedar Faqir Singh, the Senior JCO, ran a tight ship. Faqir, as his name suggested, was a quiet and saintly type of person who never allowed anyone to put a foot wrong. No question of any human rights (HR) violations as long as Faqir Sahib was around. Subedar (Hony Capt) Faqir Singh worked on a tulip farm post-retirement, and we stayed in touch even after I had left Lucky Seven. Faqir Sahib passed away in 2021, and this is my tribute to him.

One fallout of my reverting to Captain was that I could now be spared to study for and appear for the DSSC exam. Accordingly, I proceeded for the pre-staff preparatory course, followed by two months of annual leave, culminating in the exam in the first week of April 1990. I did not know it then, when I left for the pre-staff, that I would not be returning to the Emerald Isle.

Under relentless pressure from the IPKF, the LTTE formulated a new strategy, entering into a ceasefire with the SLA. They were cunningly able to convince the Sri Lankan government that this was an internal affair of theirs that they

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could resolve among themselves. Accordingly, President Premadasa, who had succeeded President Jayawardene, requested the withdrawal of all Indian troops. This request had to be acceded to as per the terms of the agreement and the IPKF started to fall back from early 1990 onwards. This rearguard action, while technically still at war with the LTTE, was no mean feat, with the LTTE rushing in to occupy the areas being vacated by the IPKF. The last unit to leave Sri Lanka was Lucky Seven on 30 March 1990, and the photos of our gallant Khalsas were everywhere, splashed across the pages of numerous periodicals. India lost close to 1200 personnel, killed in Op Pawan and a memorial to them exists at Sri Jayewardenepura Kotte on the outskirts of Colombo, which was built in 2008. The names of the 1200 soldiers who died are inscribed on black marble along the four sides of the memorial, and I laid a wreath there when I visited Sri Lanka as the COAS in October 2021. No sooner had the IPKF withdrawn than the LTTE reneged on all their promises and civil war broke out all over again. The Indian intervention from 1987 to 1990 had achieved nothing at all. The civil war in Sri Lanka was to continue for another two decades, till the capture and death of the LTTE supremo and founder, Vellupillai Prabhakaran, in May 2009.

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2.3

Line and Staff

By the time the DSSC exams were over, the Battalion had reached Gwalior and that is where I reported on termination of the exam. I was not very sure of how I had fared, particularly in the Tactics B paper, in which the solution to a tactical situation had to be given. Putting that behind me, I got down to regaining the reins of Bravo Company, as I had been away for almost three and a half months. Col SS Dhariwal had, in the meanwhile, taken over command of the Battalion. Prior to taking over command, Col Dhariwal had been posted in Pune, which is where I was staying in the SF accommodation at Golibar Maidan opposite the Office of the CDA(O)—the Controller of Defence Accounts (Officers), responsible for disbursing pay to all officers of the Indian Army.

Veena had done the shifting from Fatehgarh to Pune all on her own. Packing up all our household goods, arranging for a truck to transport the luggage to Pune, handing over the house at Fatehgarh and taking over the house at Pune. Then, unloading the truck, setting up the house and getting it running. By the time I came on my first short leave from

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Sri Lanka, I had a warm and loving home to return to. It was no mean feat, especially since this particular unit in the block of four flats had been unoccupied for a long time and was being used as a dumping ground for leftover construction material. Over and above this, she also secured a job for herself in the St Mary's Girls School, teaching French to the secondary classes. Isha was two years old by then and quite a handful at home but extremely shy of strangers. We had put her in a playschool run by a Mrs Pestonji, which Isha enjoyed going to. My routine while studying for the DSSC exam was quite set, though not extreme. There was a fine balance between work (studying) and play (family time). A few hours of study before breakfast, then helping Veena to get Isha ready for her playschool. Once both the girls had left, a few more hours of study till lunchtime. Isha and I would lunch together, and after lunch, I would play with her and tell her some stories till she fell asleep (sometimes I would doze off too). Veena would return in the mid-afternoon and I would study till about 7 p.m. From then on, it was family time, playing with Isha, her dinner, helping her get ready for bed and some more good-night stories. Following a short after-dinner stroll, it was back to the study table, but never beyond midnight. I always felt that it was not the hours spent sitting at the table but the quality of work in those hours that was more important. On Saturday evenings we used to go for the weekly shopping, followed by dinner at the India Coffee House on Moledina Road. Sundays were off days, spent with my parents at Aundh as well as our uncle, Dr AS Parasnis, who had been a professor at IIT Kanpur. Thus refreshed, I was ready to hit the books on Monday mornings.

In the same block of four flats was my coursemate Arwind Kundalkar from India Squadron, who had also taken leave to prepare for the DSSC exam. We often used to study together,

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comparing notes and filling in the blanks. Arwind was most thorough in his approach, like a typical Gorkha (he was in the Gorkha Regiment) and pointed me towards several topics I had either overlooked or not gone into in sufficient detail. While we were busy studying, his wife Anita and daughter Aarti, who was the same age as Isha, would give company to Isha, and the two girls became close friends. Both of us cleared the entrance exam and were neighbours at Wellington during the course too.

Before Col Dhariwal left for Sri Lanka, we invited him and Mrs Dhariwal over for dinner, along with a few other Regimental officers who happened to be in town. Col Dhariwal, 'Subba' to his friends, was a jovial Sikh officer, who I think was a bit surprised at having got command of a Battalion. We talked about the situation in Sri Lanka and the Battalion's duties in Trincomalee, and I gave him a first-hand account of the state of affairs. All the while, Isha was sticking to my knee, not going to anyone, not even to the other ladies present. During a lull in the conversation, Subba called out for Isha and she happily trotted off to him, much to everyone's surprise. That made Col Dhariwal's day; he was so happy at having achieved what no other could, and probably put me in his good books too. Having spent time in the Regimental Centre among Sikh troops probably had something to do with that.

My stay in Gwalior was short-lived as the DSSC exam results were announced, and once again to everyone's surprise, I had passed in the first attempt. I would have to join the DSCC 47 commencing April 1991. We were expecting our second child by then, so Veena was once again with her parents in Delhi. They had shifted to Vasant Kunj by then, a newly constructed DDA colony in which my father-in-law had been allotted a flat in a draw of lots. Vasant Kunj was then at the back of beyond and what is today a six-lane Nelson Mandela Marg,

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was little more than an unnamed and unknown road. There were no amenities within the colony, except for a red postbox that looked quite forlorn and incongruous. I had already exhausted my annual leave for the year, studying for the DSSC exam. Fortunately for me, there was a requirement to attach an officer with MI-17, the section of the Military Intelligence directorate that deals with aerial imageries and their interpretation. Since I had qualified on the Imagery Interpretation Course, I was nominated for the same and got to spend six weeks in Delhi, helping Veena during the final days of her confinement.

Back at Gwalior, I would ring up once or twice a week, late at night, from the telephone exchange, as half rates came into play after 10 p.m. Diwali was just around the corner and I hoped to be in Delhi then as the due date was also around that time. When I rang up on 16 October, I was in for a surprise. My father-in-law picked up the phone and told me that Amala, our daughter, had been born at 6 p.m. that day. I went back to the unit, roused Col Dhariwal from his bed and requested for leave, which was, of course, immediately sanctioned. I was told to hand over my duties to Vivek, so I went to his house and roused him out of bed too. We both went to the office and did a proper handing/taking over of all the secret and confidential documents; there were no shortcuts or doing things 'in good faith', which could lead to security lapses later. A quick halt at home to freshen up and pack a few things and then it was off to the railway station to catch whatever train came along first, travelling in an unreserved compartment. I reached Delhi and went straight to the hospital, the same New Delhi Nursing Home where Isha had been born. On reaching the room, I first went to Isha, who was three and a half years old by then, gave her a big hug and then went and hugged Veena and Amala. Amala is one of the names for

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Goddess Lakshmi, and since Amala was born around Diwali time, that's how she got her name.

I couldn't stay long though, as I had to proceed for the Armament and Technology Orientation Course (ATOC) at the Institute of Armament Technology (IAT), Girinagar, Pune. This was a mandatory course for all officers going for the DSSC course, in order to increase our technical threshold. The course was for about six weeks' duration, and I stayed at my home in Anand Park. Veena and the kids joined me at Pune, so we could spend some time together as a family, besides giving my parents time to spend with their grandchildren. During the course, we, of course, discussed what needed to be done in preparing for the year-long course at Wellington, a hill station in the Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu. There were many incongruous titbits of information, like carry lots of birthday presents and your own stock of *atta* (flour). One of the suggestions was that being a wet and wintry climate, possessing a car would definitely be advantageous. Now, buying a car had never been on my horizon, and I did not have the finances to buy one. The underlying logic was sound though, so I took a loan from the AG's branch, which allowed for such purchases, and bought a second-hand Fiat from Royal Motors, a dealer in Sarojini Nagar, New Delhi, for the grand sum of Rs 60,000. All four of us—Veena, Isha, Amala and Manoj (myself)—drove down from Delhi to Gwalior, our first-ever road trip as a family. Our initials become VIAM, which means 'road' in Latin but that's just a happy coincidence.

One particular event that I remember of this tenure at Gwalior was of October 1990, when a large number of *kar sevaks* marched towards Ayodhya as part of the Rath Yatra led by Shri LK Advani. To avoid any untoward incident, the Janata Dal government in Uttar Pradesh, headed by Mulayam Singh

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Yadav, relocated some 20,000 policemen to protect the Babri Masjid. 72 Infantry Brigade of which we were part, was placed on standby for internal security (IS) duties. A possible task for us was to hold the bridge over the Saryu River and to stop anyone from crossing it. We had returned from Sri Lanka only about six months earlier and still had quick trigger fingers. The orders for us, therefore, were that charged magazines would not be loaded on the rifles but kept in the magazine pouch, to be taken out only on orders. Fortunately, good sense prevailed and we were not called out but only kept on standby. Even today, I shudder to think of what might have been our response when faced with thousands of kar sevaks. Would we have fired on our own countrymen? Unarmed countrymen at that? It brought home the point very forcefully that the Army should not be called in to deal with law-and-order situations. That is the primary responsibility of the state's police force and, if beyond their capability, of the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) like the CRPF. As it so happened, on the designated day, about 40,000 kar sevaks reached the bridge leading to Ayodhya and several of them climbed the masjid in an attempt to tear it down. However, under the Chief Minister's order, the police fired at them and a scuffle broke out, killing several kar sevaks and the attempt was abandoned. We kept listening to the news with bated breath and were positively relieved when the orders came to stand down.

A year in Gwalior is all I got, as in April it was time to pack again for the move to Wellington. It was the same sequence of packing, fixing up a truck, getting the luggage loaded, handing over the house and then boarding a train to the next destination. In close to seven years of married life, Veena had already been to six different places—Budhwal, Binaguri, Fatehgarh, Pune (SF) and Gwalior, as well as a three-month sojourn at Mhow

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when I was attending the Battalion Support Weapons (BSW) course. Veena had become an expert at packing up a special 'kitchen' trunk, which contained all the essential items required to get going at any new place. It was always the first trunk to be unpacked and set a meal on the table in no time at all. To get to Wellington, we first caught a train to Chennai, then changed to another train for Mettupalayam near Coonoor and then by road to Wellington, where we were deposited at the Reception Cell in the Officers' Mess. Getting to Wellington had been a difficult journey, especially sourcing fresh milk for Isha who was four years old by then and for Amala who was barely six months old. I attended DSSC 47 in 1991–92, exactly thirty years after my father, who had attended DSSC 15 in 1961–62, when I was little over a year old.

When my father attended the DSSC, they were staying in an area called the Circle Quarters, the individual blocks being arranged so. Gorkha Hill, which is the main residential area now, was a forested hill. When my father attended the course, the Circle Quarters had been earmarked for demolition and they would probably have been the last occupants. When my parents came to visit, they were surprised to see the Circle Quarters still going strong. It reminded me of what Admiral Hyman G. Rickover, the father of the US nuclear submarine programme, had written in his memoirs, 'There is nothing more permanent than a temporary government building.' The TRS huts that we had stayed in at Budhwal were a testament to this statement.

The one year at Wellington passed by in a flash. We learnt the need for meticulous planning and to be able to convert that planning into flawless execution. We wrote dozens of orders and instructions covering all operational and administrative issues. All submissions were against a strict deadline and it was not uncommon to see student officers making their way

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pell-mell to the locker room just minutes before the closing bell. In those days, all submissions were handwritten, there were no computers then, and we had a special ruled cardboard sheet called a Staff Duties (SD) card, which was placed below the main sheet of paper to get the alignment just right. It was a tedious and painstaking job to write out as many as thirty to forty pages on occasion, without a single mistake, cutting or overwriting. One mistake and that page had to be rewritten. Some officers, when hard-pressed for time, would get their wives to do the writing for them. One such officer got his corrected assignment back with the remark, 'Your wife's handwriting has improved.' Sometimes, we seniors feel that the officers have it easy now, with Microsoft Word and 'cut and paste' making staff work so much easier. I see no harm in that, if the time saved can be used for more productive activities, including spending time with your family, something we were hard-pressed for. All of us were in the same age bracket with two children each, so there would be a birthday party almost every week. That innocuous titbit of information to carry lots of birthday presents, which we had done, came in handy. The alternative would have been to buy gifts from the one and only local store, aptly named 'Needs' at exorbitant hill-station prices.

The cost of living in Wellington was high and it was difficult to make ends meet, with pay scales in those days being abysmally low. I had placed standing instructions from my bank in Pune to transfer a fixed sum to the bank in Wellington. By the end of the month, we used to be down to our last hundred rupees. Several officers had withdrawn money from their provident fund (PF) or had regular top-ups from their parents. We had a large number of guests throughout the year—parents, uncles and aunts, brothers and sisters, even my brother's friends—which added to the monthly expenses. We entertained them all

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as best we could, but we never borrowed money from anyone, not from our parents, nor withdrew any money from the PF. I remember one month that was particularly critical, we were almost broke when a cheque arrived in the mail for a short story that I had written for the *Infantry Journal* a few months earlier. That cheque for Rs 300 was like a blessing from heaven and pulled us through to the end of the month.

I must have done well in the course because, on its termination, I was posted as the Brigade Major (BM) of 28 Infantry Brigade at Sunderbani, J & K which was part of 10 Infantry Division. I had been to Sunderbani a few times during my the earlier tenure at Budhwal as part of the same Division. It was again a field posting, so I once again applied for SF accommodation in Pune. Pune is a high-pressure station as far as accommodation is concerned, and I had to run from pillar to post to get the SF accommodation allotted in the two months annual leave that I had been granted before joining the new assignment. This time we were allotted a house at Gurudwara Road, closer to the city, and within walking distance of Pune's famous Main Street (though renamed Mahatma Gandhi [MG] Road, it is still known as Main Street only). Isha was admitted to St Mira's Girls School on Sadhu Vaswani Road and Amala into the playschool of St Mary's Girls School, where Veena had taught earlier. Unlike on the previous occasion when I had moved to Sri Lanka, at least this time I could settle Veena and the girls before moving out. Later on, Veena would get a part-time job at the St Mira's College for Girls. While at Wellington, Veena had learnt to drive the car, so even in my absence, she could take the girls out to my parents' place or for other short outings. Veena made sure she was not dependent on me and I think that it is important for all our Army wives to be so, given the inherent risk in our profession. In fact, I would

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go so far as to say that all women must be able to stand on their own two feet and not be dependent on the largesse of parents or in-laws.

28 Infantry Brigade had its HQ at Sunderbani, about two hours' drive from Akhnoor on the Akhnoor–Rajouri Road, with its Battalions deployed on the Line of Control (LC). It was commanded by Brig KPN Singh of the Punjab Regiment, a stern no-nonsense kind of man. A teetotaller and a strict vegetarian with frugal habits, work was worship for him. Once I had taken over from the incumbent BM, he called me and told me to visit each and every post in the Brigade Area of Responsibility (AOR) and only then return to the HQ, no matter how long it took. There were 71 such posts in the AOR, from Company, Platoon and Section level posts and even two-man observation posts, some of which could only be visited at night, as the Pakis would fire at us from across the LC. I was taken around and shown each inch of the ground, briefed about our own and enemy plans, and the alignment of the LC, which was inviolate. I also got the opportunity to meet the COs and Company Commanders of the three Battalions, as well as the Adjutants I would be dealing with on a daily basis. Maj YK Joshi of 13 JAK RIF and Maj Asit Mistry of 12 MARATHA LI were two such Company Commanders.[1] Capt A Sengupta of 14 PUNJAB (AKAL SAHAE) was one of the Adjutants.[2] It took me about three weeks to visit all the posts, mostly on foot, staying overnight at some of them, observing the Pakistani side and their movement patterns. Laleali, the forward-most Company location, where Joshi (Jo) was located, was one of the most vital locations in the divisional sector, from where one could get a clear view of the entire Chhamb plains. If only Laleali had been able to observe those mysterious lights I had seen back in 1984, when deployed at Sangam, it would have saved us a lot of trouble.

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Brig KPN Singh was a hands-on kind of Commander, who liked to do most things himself. Whenever some letters came from the Div HQ asking for some comments or the other, he would jot down the outline reply on the reverse of the letter itself, which we then had to just flesh out into a cogent response. As a result, the DAA and QMG, Maj SS Randhawa and I, as the principal staff officers of the HQ, had a reasonably *khushi*, comfortable time. Brig KPN Singh being a simple person, had also passed orders that Tuesdays would be observed as dry days, meaning that liquor would not be served in the Officers' Mess. This restriction was easily overcome by having a couple of drinks in the room itself, before going to the Mess for dinner. I was to draw some very important lessons from that. The first was of observing an order or instruction in both 'letter and spirit'. We were all following the order in 'letter', but flouting the 'spirit' behind the order. The second was the futility of passing an order that was not implementable and going to be honoured more in the breach.

Brig KPN Singh was replaced by Brig Surat Singh Sandhu of the Artillery Regiment. The two were as different as chalk and cheese. Brig Sandhu was a total extrovert, liked his *sharab* and *kabab* (drinks and snacks) and was a keen golfer and outdoorsman. We were a bit shell-shocked by his arrival, and I think it showed in our countenance. Brig KPN Singh called Randhawa and me and gently explained the facts of life. You cannot choose your superiors or subordinates, he said, you have to work with all kinds of people, going on to add that the new Commander had the highest professional reputation. We should look past the surface, and as long as we were true to our profession, we had nothing to fear. Somewhat mollified, we bid Brig KPN Singh farewell and turned to our new Commander with the former's words ringing in our ears.

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Brig KPN Singh could not have been more perceptive. I think I learnt more from Brig Sandhu than from Brig KPN Singh. Brig Sandhu would make us explain the logic behind every recommendation, backed by sound facts and figures. Whereas Brig KPN Singh had mothered us, Brig Sandhu made us really do the staff work that was expected of us. When we went around for the first operational familiarization, Brig Sandhu asked the officers and JCOs all sorts of questions. What is the name of that feature or how wide and deep is this rivulet and such like. Quite often the personnel present there would not know the answer and Brig Sandhu would turn to me with an inquiring look. Thanks to the three weeks I had spent familiarizing myself (on Brig KPN Singh's orders) I could reply positively to almost all queries. Brig Sandhu quickly realized that I was not some desk-bound staff officer but knew my beans, all thanks to Brig KPN Singh. After that, I could do no wrong as far as Brig Sandhu was concerned. During the familiarization, Brig Sandhu had often saddled up on a mule for some of the steeper climbs. I would walk up by the shorter route and be waiting for him at the top. He would often refer to me as a goral (a type of mountain goat that was found in the area).

The goral was almost the cause of our undoing. Seeing the difficult terrain, we had projected the requirement of a motorable track so that vehicles could ply up and down, making the administration of these far-flung and isolated posts that much easier. However, for the project to go through, we needed the clearance of the Principal Conservator of Forests (PCF), whose office was in Jammu. This was just not forthcoming, citing the disturbance and ecological impact that it would have on the goral population in the area. Brig Sandhu knew better than to fight this red tape. Instead, he asked me to organize a picnic near these posts and invite the PCF for a fun day out.

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The PCF accepted with alacrity, no doubt thinking that he could mix business with pleasure. On the appointed day, we picked him up in the staff car, and then transferred him on to a mule, before making him walk the rest of the way to the top, where he was received with a chilled glass of beer. Neither the proposed road nor the elusive goral, of which we had not seen hide nor hair, was mentioned throughout the afternoon. About a week after this picnic, we received the sanction to go ahead with the road. Case closed.

Militancy was just rearing its head in the Kashmir Valley, but here, South of the Pir Panjal Range, things were still relatively quiet. There used to be almost daily instances of trans-LC firing, but this was restricted to small arms (SA) fire only. Every morning starting from 0500 hours, the Adjutants would call up and give me the situation report (SITREP) of the night's activities. Which Pakistani post had fired on which post of ours, with which weapons and how many rounds of each (which was more guesswork, one burst being counted as twenty rounds), and our response. If the call came in the morning, it was 'routine'; if a call came at any other time, it meant we had probably suffered some casualties, either killed or injured. Then, we would all get activated, arranging for helicopters to be available at daybreak for casualty evacuation. That's what the 'Staff' was there for, to take care of the paperwork, the back end, leaving the fighting units on the 'Line' free of such worries. If it was all routine, I would compile the reports and give the Commander a call by about 0530 hours. Once cleared by him, I'd call the GSO-1 (Operations) at the Divisional HQ, latest by 0600 hours. This was an unwavering routine. A similar procedure was followed for the evening sitrep, which had to be given to the Division latest by 1800 hours. Even at that early hour, Brig Sandhu would catch something that was not quite

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gelling. How is that Paki post firing on this post of ours when it is at a lower height? Or how is this post of ours firing an MMG when it doesn't have one? All these queries would have to be followed-up during the day and would normally have a logical explanation—the MMG had been temporarily re-sited for instance. This attention to detail would keep us, the Staff, on our toes. I would, of course, in turn, haul up the Adjutants for not keeping me updated.

Although a field area, families were allowed to come for up to three months at a time. During the summer or winter breaks Veena, Isha and Amala would join me at Sunderbani. Coming from Pune to Jammu in the Jhelum Express with two kids in tow was no mean task. But Veena would manage this on her own, keeping the girls fed and entertained. Isha and Amala have always been good travellers, always enjoying the adventure without any fuss or tantrums. I would go down from Sunderbani to Jammu to pick them up, and Brig Sandhu would often ask me to take his staff car for this purpose. I had a two-room set as my house, each with an attached bath. The second bath was converted into a makeshift kitchen, where Veena would make wholesome khichdi (a dish made of rice and lentils) for the girls, before sending them out to play. They would wander about the HQ, Isha holding on tightly to Amala's hand. They would go to the Officers' Mess and have their fill of saunf (fennel seeds) and shakkar (sugar) and were nicknamed thus. Perhaps their father raiding the Officers' Mess at Devlali had rubbed off on them. Evenings we would go for long walks, enjoying the fresh air and beauty of the Sunderbani Valley, or for a picnic on the banks of the Munawar Tawi (river). It was quite idyllic and gave Veena a chance to relax and de-stress after being on her own at Pune, looking single-handedly after home and hearth. At the end of their stay, I would accompany them back to Pune as I would be

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due for some leave by then. Even though Isha was only in Class I, we had decided that we would never miss out on school days. We were always back in time for the new session, and in a way, it rubbed off on the kids to take education seriously.

One evening towards the end of my tenure, Brig Sandhu called me up, asking me what I was doing. It was about 7.30 p.m. and I told him, 'Nothing much, just tying up details for the next day'. 'Come up here (to his residence) immediately,' he said and hung up the phone. I hastily exited, telling my runner to close the office and took the short walk up to the Flag Staff House, wondering what sins I might have committed. He greeted me cordially at the entrance and after offering me a seat, opened a bottle of Scotch whisky (it was still a rarity). We spent the evening chatting about this and that. Brig Sandhu was in an expansive mood and I was left wondering about this sudden social call. The next day, the results of the promotion board from Brigadier to Major General were announced and lo and behold, Brig Sandhu's name was on the approved list. The mystery of the previous evening's call was resolved. Obviously, he had come to know of the result and wanted to share his success with someone. Who else could he call upon than his Brigade Major, his right-hand man? That does not mean we did not have our differences. During briefings and presentations, even in the presence of the COs and Brigade Officers, I would have heated arguments with him, even threatening to walk out on one occasion. Brig Sandhu called me back when I was at the door, and I had the good sense to return. Discretion is the better part of valour. Of all the bosses I have had, I would rate Brig Surat Singh Sandhu as one of the best.[3]

During this period, the unit, after completing its peace tenure at Gwalior, had moved to Kaksar near Kargil as part of 121 (I) Infantry Brigade Group. This was a high-altitude

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area (HAA), with our highest post being at Point 5299 (5299 m above mean sea level, or about 16,400 ft). Being an HAA, it was only a two-year tenure, so the unit was already slated to be moving out to Meerut, with the advance party under Lt Col AVS Ghuman, the 2iC, already in station. In anticipation of that move, we packed up from Pune and shifted to Meerut, staying in a two-room set in the Officers' Mess. The girls were admitted to the Sophia Girls School and Veena also got a job in the same school. It was a big relief for all of them to be going to the same school, as in Pune, all three had been going to different institutions in different parts of the town. Having settled them in, I proceeded to Kaksar, up to Jammu by train and then by road convoy to Kaksar with an overnight halt at the Srinagar transit camp. This was thus my third tenure in J & K. In those pre-Kargil War (1999) days, the entire area from Dras to Kargil was looked after solely by 121(I) Inf Bde, with its HQ at Kargil, reporting directly to the 15 Corps at Srinagar.[4] Our Battalion, 7 SIKH LI, was at Kaksar with the Companies deployed on the dominating heights on both sides of the Shingo River, in a sensitive area called Intrusion Dalunang.

Intrusion Dalunang has an interesting history. There used to be an old trade route going along the Eastern bank of the Shingo River from Kaksar, via Dalunang and Kunar to Gultari. When the LC was demarcated post the 1971 war, Dalunang came on our side and Kunar on the Pakistani side. Prior to the war, Dalunang had been evacuated and the route from Kaksar to Dalunang was mined. Post the ceasefire, no one had actually gone to the village; neither the villagers nor the Army. A few years later, around 1975, the villagers wanted to go back to their village and started clamouring for compensation for the harvest of their apricot trees. The DC, a conscientious person, wanted to see the village and these apricot trees for himself,

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before granting any compensation. Accordingly, a route was de-mined by the Army and a party set off towards Dalunang, only to be fired on by the Pakistanis who were already sitting there, having intruded on our side of the LC. Two Companies of a Punjab Battalion were hastily rushed up to contain this intrusion, led by Maj RR Nimbhorkar.[5] Over a period of time, the position had been fortified and was then occupied by an entire Battalion.

On arrival at the Bn HQ, I reported to the CO, Col GPS Bedi, who had taken over from Col Dhariwal. Col Bedi told me to take over as the Adjutant, which was a big comedown from the BM appointment I was holding earlier. Based on my Sunderbani experience, I made only one request to the CO, and that was to allow me to go to all the posts, at least up to all the Company HQs, before getting behind a desk. That request was turned down on the plea that this familiarization round would take at least a week to ten days. Since we were moving out in any case, in about a month, why bother? I was not entirely happy with this outlook but after much persuading, I did manage to get permission to go up to our own post of Dalunang, which was dominated on all sides by the Pakistanis. This move had to be carried out at night, moonless nights at that, since portions of the track were under observation from the Pakis, who would open speculative fire on these exposed stretches. At Dalunang, one had to perforce stay the whole day, being able to move back only after darkness had set in. Against this backdrop, we ought to have been more careful and on the lookout for any such clandestine intrusion attempts, which did occur in the same area in 1999, leading to the Kargil War.

It would be more than three months before we finally moved out to Meerut. It was the second time I had joined the Battalion just as it was leaving HAA, not allowing me to earn

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my HAA ribbon, which required a stay of at least six months. Nevertheless, moving to a peace station after the field tenure at Sunderbani plus Kaksar was something to look forward to. After almost three years of being out of the Battalion on DSSC plus Staff, it was now time to get back to Line duties and Regimental life once again.

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2.4

Meerut: Adieu to Lucky Seven

Soon after moving to Meerut in mid-1994, Col AVS Ghuman took over the Bn on his promotion. As the senior-most Major, apart from my main role as the HQ Company Commander, I also officiated as the 2iC. During our tenure at Kaksar, the Companies had been on their own at isolated posts, infrequently visited by senior officers and with little centralized command. Because of the nature of the deployment in close proximity to Pakistani posts, standards of turnout, discipline and training had dropped. Nothing alarming, since it happens during all field tenures, and hence the peace tenure to get the standards up again before deploying to the next field. At Meerut, we were part of 32 Inf Bde of 9 Inf Div, which also had its HQ at Meerut. The Div had both a primary defensive role and a secondary offensive role with its area of operations in Punjab. The GOCs of the Division were Maj Gen SG Pitre (Engineers) and later Maj Gen JJ Singh (MARATHA LI), who would go on to become the twenty-first Chief of the Army Staff (COAS). The Brigade Commanders were Brig Yadav (Armoured) and Brig Chauhan (Guards–Mech).

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Meerut was rather a busy station, leading one of the officers to remark that 'there is no peace in a peace station'. Events followed one after the other with no let-up; operational commitments, professional competitions, sports competitions and administrative inspections, most often with conflicting and overlapping dates. The long-range for firing, for example, would be allotted on the same dates as for the annual inspection of arms (AIA). It seemed the required diligence in staff work was not being done, and no one seemed to be perturbed about it. It forced units to take shortcuts and sometimes fudge their records. Col Ghuman, though, was an absolute stickler, a go-by-the-book kind of person who would cut us no slack. He was hard on himself too, as he tried to get the paltan back into shape. The other officers felt that after a hard HAA tenure, some leeway was warranted. As the 2iC, this put me in a difficult position. The CO would complain to me that the officers and JCOs were not pulling their weight. The officers and JCOs would come to me complaining of their impossible workloads. It fell on me to act as the buffer and keep the paltan going. It also highlighted to me the importance of having the entire team on board when embarking on a new enterprise.

Meerut was even busier for me. As the only staff college-qualified officer in the Brigade, all the central workload fell on me. Umpire for a divisional exercise—Maj Naravane; examiner for Part D promotion exam—Maj Naravane; officer in charge to conduct firing competition—ditto; master of ceremonies for Bogra Day celebrations[1]—*hazir hai* (present, sir)! There were times when I would come back from one assignment in the morning and depart for the next in the evening. This was more than Veena had bargained for and she was quite annoyed with me for being missing all the time. She had the complete right to expect my presence, especially after having been alone in the

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SF at Pune. But she kept her composure and knew that, given a choice, I would rather have stayed home with her and the kids, playing some board games and trying to see if the girls could catch me cheating (just to keep them alert), which they would with squeals of joy. Even now, they are always on the lookout for some sleight of hand that I might be perpetrating.

To make matters worse, I was found to have an 'abnormal ECG' during my routine annual medical. I'm no medical expert, but apparently, it was abnormal enough for the medical specialist at MH Meerut to directly call up the CO and advise him of my immediate hospitalization. I felt physically fine, having just cleared my battle physical efficiency tests (BPET), but mentally, I was in a state of shock. I insisted I was fine but the medical specialist, Col Karambiah, would have none of it. I told him I would just go home and return, but when he came to know I had come on my scooter, he declined even that request. That matters could be so serious came like a bolt from the blue and only added to the stress that Veena and I were under. Col Karambiah gave me some sound advice. He said, 'I know you'll be fine, but better get it checked up and cleared now, rather than later in life when it might be held against you.' From Meerut, I was referred to the Command Hospital, Lucknow, going there by train, accompanied by a nursing assistant to cater for any emergency en route, and put through a battery of tests by the cardiologist there, a Col Chawla, who was supposed to be as tough as nails. A stress thallium and stress MUGA revealed nothing wrong, but Col Chawla nevertheless downgraded me medically for a period of six months. This was a serious blow to my morale and I was quite down in the dumps, but being with Veena and the girls helped cheer me up. After the six months were over, it was back to the CH once again for a repeat of all the tests, to see if there were any changes or

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anomalies detected. Once again, everything was fine and Col Chawla reluctantly upgraded me back to SHAPE-1 and as I was told later, one of the few officers ever to be so upgraded. Ever since then, I have got myself tested regularly and have never hidden my health status. Health comes first. Even as the Army Commander, Eastern Command, when it was known that I was in the running for becoming Chief, I got myself comprehensively tested, including a CT angiography. I did the same before retirement and am proud to say that I retired in SHAPE-1.[2]

I got my first exposure to computerized war gaming during this tenure. The fledging Wargaming Development Centre (WARDEC) located in New Delhi had, in collaboration with a civilian software company, developed a rudimentary software. It was based on desert terrain, with a Company in defence and a Battalion in attack. The software needed to be test bedded and our unit was selected for it as the Battalion attacking and a Company from the other Battalion as the defence. It would be run under the supervision of the Brigade Commander, who was to act as the Control, directing the exercise, though it would be the system software that would give the outcome of each engagement. Before the game could be played, each side had to key in their detailed plans. The Control comprised the Commander, his staff and me. Keying in the plans was a laborious task, so rudimentary was the software. It would hang for no rhyme or reason, undoing hours of work, and rebooting the system itself was time-consuming. The last time the unit had been in the desert was in 1983, and except for the CO and me, no one had any knowledge of desert warfare. Quite naturally, Col Ghuman, the CO, asked me to take a few classes for the officers: what would be the enemy pattern of operations as a defender and what should be our own design of battle as

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an attacker? It was all very theoretical, but for some reason, the Cdr thought I was 'leaking' the plans and forbade me from speaking either to the CO or any of the unit officers.

I tried to explain to him that I was just being an unbiased instructor and that the officers of the other unit were equally free to attend but to no avail. I also pointed out that if I really wished to compromise the exercise, I could just as easily speak to the CO after we had broken off for the day and returned to our rooms, and that he was, in fact, doubting my very integrity. I don't think he liked that very much, but since he was adamant, I asked to be excused from the Control. The war game continued as scheduled, the outcome being more to test the software program and glitches rather than any tactical outcome. It was not a win-lose kind of a war game to see who was more competent professionally but was aimed more at testing the software. Anyway, we all returned to the unit and I forgot all about this incident.

While at Meerut, I was nominated to attend the Senior Command (SC) course at the AWC, Mhow. Unlike the JC course, which is mandatory for all officers, the SC course is by nomination, based on merit. Getting nominated for the SC course means one is on the right track for the next rank. Because of the ongoing school term, Veena and the girls could not accompany me to Mhow, so once again, three months of the peace tenure were spent away from each other. I did well on this course too, getting another instructional grading, which further enhanced my professional reputation. At about the same time, the results of the selection board (SB 4) from Maj to Lt Col were declared and I had made the grade.[3] While I was away on SC, Vivek, now a Lt Col had rejoined the unit and taken over as the 2iC. Since the authorization prevailing at that time allowed for only one Lt Col in the unit, it meant that I would once again

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have to move on posting without having the full peace tenure. I could only wish that I would get some nice place, but my wishes were only partly fulfilled, as my posting came to the HQ Establishment 22 (known as Est two-two), located at Chakrata, as the Assistant Adjutant and Quarter Master General (AA and QMG), or simply AQ. My promotion was to take effect on assuming charge in March 1997.

The Special Frontier Force (SFF), of which HQ Est 22 forms part, functions under the Ministry of Home Affairs. There is an HQ SFF in Delhi, with the Inspector General (IG) SFF at the helm, who is a two-star officer from the Army, acting as the interface with the ministry. Under the IG is the HQ Est 22, commanded by a Brigadier located at Chakrata, as is the SFF Academy, which acts as its training centre. It has several Vikas Battalions (akin to Infantry Battalions) deployed all over the country under the operational control of the Army and manned primarily by Army officers on deputation to the SFF. The HQ SFF and HQ Est 22 thus discharge only the raise-train-sustain functions for the SFF, with its actual employment in operations being the prerogative of the local army formation commander. Sustenance of the SFF being the major function, the AQ had an important role to play and was in effect the right-hand man of the Commandant. The HQ also had a training branch, headed by a GSO-2 (Training), Maj Ajay Gairola, a coursemate (CM) of mine.

Chakrata is a quaint cantonment established in 1869 and is part of Dehradun district in the state of Uttarakhand (then undivided Uttar Pradesh). It lies between the Tons and Yamuna rivers, at an elevation of about 2200 m, making for a salubrious climate all year round. To reach Chakrata, one has to go from Dehradun to Herbertpore, then turn North towards Kalsi and onwards to Chakrata. The roads then were narrow and

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treacherous so only one-way traffic was permitted following a 'gate' system controlled by the SFF. On reaching Chakrata, the military-restricted area is to the left, heavily forested and well laid out. To the right is the civil area, with barren hillsides and unplanned development. The contrast couldn't be starker.

On reaching Chakrata, I reported to the Commandant and was promoted to the rank of Lt Col. This Commandant was the first non-Parachute Regiment officer to be posted to this fully paratrooper force and he was very keen to prove himself. I took over charge from Lt Col MB Saxena of the Assam Regiment, a very meticulous officer who carried out the handing over in great detail, including the pitfalls and the issues he had faced. He did not hold anything back with that 'let the new guy stumble and learn' attitude. Of all the times I have taken over, I must say that this was the best handing over that I ever had. I had done a fair job of handing over my BM duties to my relief, but this was even better, making me resolve to do the same in every future assignment. This was all the more important because this was an altogether new field as far as I was concerned. As officers, we are drawn more to the 'G' side, the operations side, which is more glamorous. Even after the Staff course, everyone wants to be slotted into an operations billet. Even as the handing over progressed, I realized how important were the 'A' and 'Q' sides of the staff. The 'A' branch deals with all aspects related to manpower, discipline, welfare, pay, allowances and the like—basically all HR issues. The 'Q' branch deals with all issues relating to logistics, supplies of all kinds—rations, water, fuel, maintenance of assets, both movable and immovable, and running of essential services. Wars may or may not happen, but troops had to be housed and fed all year round. There was no 'off' day when it came to Q matters. Sunday or holiday, rain or shine, the maintenance chain had to keep running.

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My stay in Chakrata and tenure as the AQ was a great learning experience that was to stand me in good stead in later years. As the AQ, I was also the ex-officio member of the Cantonment Board, another grey area not known to many. In fact, as I was to learn later, in most foreign armies, the toppers from various courses such as the DSSC were sent to logistics billets, these being the more challenging ones. Needless to say, all these multifarious tasks kept me busy from dawn to dusk, even busier than what I had been as the BM. It was not just a desk-bound job. Along with the Commandant, we also used to visit the Vikas Battalions that were allotted to various formations of the Army. On such visits, apart from the Commandant, his staff officer and myself, the deputy commandant of the SF Academy, Lt Col David Devashyaman, who was also my CM, would be part of the group. The Battalions were located all along the border with Tibet, starting from Leh in the North, to Doom Dooma in the North-east. It was a wonderful opportunity to see the border areas and how the SFF Battalions were operating. In some places, there were a few issues between the local Army unit and the SFF unit, but our visit helped smooth them over. On one occasion, while visiting a Battalion in the Central Sector (Himachal Pradesh), we had made an unscheduled landing at an Army helipad as we were running low on fuel. The JCO there refused to do the refuelling saying that we were not 'Army'. That it was an IAF chopper with all the markings or that we were Army officers ourselves, did not have any effect on him. I had to sit down with the phone and keep calling up the chain, until the Brigade Commander of that sector finally gave the permission. It not only showed the lack of coordination between various arms of the government but also the lack of initiative at the level of the junior leadership. These were all points to note and take up formally on return

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to the HQ, not as a complaint, but to streamline the standard operating procedures (SOP).

Chakrata was a very small cantonment and the station had only very rudimentary facilities. The AQ had a nice house atop a small hillock, not far from the Commandant's Flag Staff House. As far as the Army was concerned, it was a 'field' posting but families could join and stay. There was a small school, run by the Est, which used to operate from an old church building that had been re-appropriated for this purpose. It all seemed reasonably fine and we decided that Veena and the kids should shift to Chakrata, so that we could all be together. The summer holidays were just around the corner, so we decided that Veena should first come up, have a look and take a final decision thereafter, but we had more or less made up our minds. Veena had tendered her resignation at the school and taken the school leaving certificates for the girls since we would all be moving to Chakrata. The three of them came up for the summer holidays and we had a wonderful time. Chakrata in the summers was like heaven. Being a restricted area, there was little or no tourist traffic, unlike nearby Mussoorie. The hills were full of pine trees and rhododendron bushes, out of which the locals made a syrup that could be used to make a refreshing squash. Everything seemed perfect, but unfortunately, it wasn't.

The Commandant and The Deputy Commandant were not getting along. The working environment in the HQ was bordering on the toxic. With contradictory orders emanating from the commandant and the deputy commandant, we as the staff were being pulled in two different directions. Any difference of opinion on professional matters was seen as dissent and penalized. The Commandant wanted to get things done in a hurry, probably to justify his appointment as the first non-Para officer to hold this billet. Whatever may have been the case, he

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could not build up the team. It was always a blame game with us at the receiving end. 'We' had been replaced by 'you'. It was not 'we have made a mistake' but 'you have made a mistake', totally unlike the Army ethos. The Deputy Commandant tried to shield us as much as possible, but the more he shielded us, the more intense became the rivalry between the two. Under such circumstances, we thought better of shifting to Chakrata and applied instead for SF accommodation at Meerut. Since the unit was still at Meerut, at least that support would be forthcoming. Veena requested the school if she could rejoin and the sisters accepted this request straightaway. They had been sad to see Veena leave and were overjoyed at her return. Isha and Amala were among the principal's favourites and it was like returning to the fold. So once again, we were going to have to stay apart, though this time it was our choice.

All the men and women in the SFF are fully para-qualified and proudly wear the para wings on their uniform along with the maroon beret, which is the hallmark of paratroopers the world over. It felt strange not to be para-qualified in an all-para force. In fact, the Commandant was firmly of the opinion that all officers coming on deputation must volunteer and qualify as soon as possible on reporting to the SFF. Many would not, and this would instantaneously put them in the bad books of the Commandant. The airborne training was conducted at the Para Training School (PTS) at Sarsawa, and that is where David, Ajay and I reported, having volunteered for it as much to qualify, as to get away from the shenanigans of the Commandant for six weeks. Jumping out of a plane was better than bearing with the Commandant.

The six weeks of training were tough. We were generally fit but not at the levels required for paratrooper training. The first few days were almost entirely spent on regaining peak

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levels of physical fitness. Then came the actual para training itself, the para position and the para roll. How to wear the main and reserve parachutes and how to deal with emergencies. The different kinds of landings, including water landing or in a built-up area. How to exit from the helicopter, first from mock-ups, then from actual helicopters. We were progressively taught to jump and roll from ever-increasing heights, starting from ground level to about four feet, as even with a parachute, that is the kind of impact that has to be absorbed. We were taken up a fifty-foot-high tower and made to look down over the edge to check for any signs of fear or vertigo, and one or two jawans did fail this test. A full dress rehearsal followed, where we wore both the main and reserve chutes, emplaned and went over the dropping zone (DZ). We were made to stand at the edge of the moving helicopter and had to stick one leg out as if actually jumping out. Back on the ground, we were shown how parachutes are sorted and repacked after every jump, right from the airing and drying room to the packing tables. Each parachute is serially numbered and a log is maintained, recording how many 'jumps' that parachute has done and the names of the people doing the packing. Folding and packing a parachute so that it opens smoothly when the ripcord is pulled is a highly skilled job, with the packers acutely conscious that one small mistake on their part may result in a fatal accident.

Finally, the big day dawned for our first jump. There was a mid-term break, so Veena and the girls joined me at Sarsawa to witness the jumps. They, along with other family members, came by road and were taken to the spectators' gallery at the DZ. We trainees went to the tarmac and boarded the waiting helicopters. Each helicopter was carrying two sticks (rows) of paratroopers sitting on the port (left) and starboard (right) side, each of six to seven men and women. As per convention, the

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officer always jumps first, so in my helicopter, I was the first person closest to the ramp to the rear of the helicopter on the port side, which meant that I was the last to board the aircraft. For jumps, the clamshell doors at the rear of the aircraft are removed, so during the take-off and transit, one can see the countryside below. I had a spectacular view since I was right at the edge. Approaching the DZ, the red warning light came on, one minute to DZ, and we all lumbered to our feet facing the rear of the helicopter and hooking up our ripcords to the static line in the helicopter. The light changed; GREEN ON – GO came the order and I jumped (or was I pushed?) out of the helicopter assisted by the para instructor. 'One thousand, two thousand, three thousand, four thousand, five thousand . . . CANOPY', I shouted as taught, looking up to check that the parachute canopy had fully deployed, to the sound of the receding chopper blades. After that was blissful silence, with only the sound of the wind in my ears and the serene sight of the other parachutes floating gently down.

There is a sign in the PTS that reads, 'You can jump from thousands of feet, but it is the last inch that hurts.' That last inch was rushing up to me, or rather the other way around, at an alarming speed. I tried to remember all that I had been taught: ankles and knees tightly together, hands straight up holding the risers, palms facing forward, chin tucked in, the direction of the wind and whether to do a front right or front left roll and . . . WHAM. I hit the ground with a resounding thud, and the roll I did must surely not have been part of any manual. I also had a sharp pain in my right knee and I thought to myself, 'Boy, this is it, first and last jump.' I got to my feet, collected the chute and limped back to the RV, handing in the main and reserve before joining my wife and kids at the grandstand, where Veena was happy to see me back on terra firma. With my jump out of

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the way, I could now watch the other sorties and jumpers more peacefully. Each trooper has to carry out five jumps to qualify for the coveted Wings, including a jump with full equipment and a night jump. My friends and I did those over the next week or so, maintaining a log of every jump. Having qualified, we were also now entitled to para-allowance, an extra Rs 300 per month, which was a bonus. To continue drawing this allowance, two refresher jumps have to be done each year, but unfortunately, my turn for that never came.

8 SIKH LI, commanded by Col SK Agarwal, was located in a field area in Assam. It was under 311 Infantry Brigade, part of 5 Mountain Division, which had its operational role in the Tawang Sector of Arunachal Pradesh. However, due to pressing internal security requirements, one Brigade, namely 311 Infantry Brigade, had been detached and given to 21 Mountain Division, which looked after IS duties in the whole of Assam. The situation prevailing at that time was quite poor due to the depredations of various terrorist groups, including the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), Dima Halim Daogah (DHD) and many others. 8 SIKH LI did not have any 2iC posted and had requested one. That's how a little over a year into my tenure with the SFF, I was transferred to this Battalion, with the aim of eventually taking over the same Battalion once Col Agarwal completed his tenure. In any case, Vivek was already present in Lucky Seven and slated to take over, so I would have had to move out anyway.

7 SIKH LI was also getting ready to move out for its field posting, so rather than continue at Meerut, we decided to shift to Delhi, with Veena, Isha and Amala staying with Veena's parents at Vasant Kunj. It would also be more convenient for me whenever I came on leave. We admitted Isha and Amala to

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the Army Public School, Dhaula Kuan, a huge school with over 6000 students and we wondered how the girls would adjust. We need not have worried though, as Isha met up with her old pal Aarti Kundalkar, friends since Golibar Maidan and Staff College days, and trotted off inside without a backward glance. Amala did have a bit of a problem finding her way around in such a big school, which had separate buildings for the primary, secondary and senior secondary wings, but she too adjusted in no time. Once the girls were settled, Veena too started scouting around and got a job at the Bloom Public School in Vasant Kunj itself. This made it possible for her to leave for school after the kids had left and come back about an hour before Isha and Amala returned. In a place like Delhi, it was a boon to have the workplace just a five-minute drive away. I think those were some of the best years, with the grandparents and grandchildren staying together and bonding strongly.

Col Agarwal was very happy to see me and brought me up to speed. On account of the peculiar nature of the operations, the Battalion was being shifted frequently, to wherever there was a crisis. By the time the Battalion could settle down, it was moved again. This, coupled with the fact that there was no permanent 2iC, meant that the CO had not been on leave for nearly a year, and so he was really looking forward to my arrival. Col Agarwal was even more than meticulous. He noted each and every point in a diary (a habit I copied) and once it went into his diary, it would remain there until it was fructified. There was no escaping it; it might be three weeks or three months later, but the point would not be struck off till it had reached a satisfactory conclusion. He was extremely meticulous in his planning, especially for the officers. For each officer, he had made an employment plan for the entire year that included a spot of leave every three months or so. One never had to ask

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him for leave. Instead, he would call you and ask you to get ready to proceed on leave and to get the train or air reservations done. Perhaps the fact that he had suffered on this account made him more sympathetic to our welfare. There was a lot to learn from him.

When I joined, the Bde HQ was at Nagaon, Assam, with the Bn HQ at Kathiatali, a small village on the Nagaon–Doboka–Lumding road. The Companies were strung out along this road, including a Company for the protection of the Indian Oil Corporation Limited (IOCL) terminal at Lumding. We carried out a number of operations here, with some success, neutralizing a dreaded ULFA cadre known as *Hath Kata* since he had only one arm. A couple of months after I reached, just as the CO was preparing to go on leave, orders came for us to move to the Kokrajhar district of Assam where the NDFB had carried out a massacre in one of the relief camps. I took the advance party and left, driving all the way from Kathiatali to Kokrajhar with Veena in tow, who had just joined the previous evening. The drive was surreal. We drove from Kathiatali via Jagiroad to Guwahati, crossing over to the North of the Brahmaputra, then via Rangia (HQ of 21 Mountain Division) through Barpeta and Bongaigaon to Kokrajhar, which we reached late in the evening. Except for these towns, the countryside was absolutely devoid of any habitation. No *dhabas* or restaurants, no STD/PCO booths or anything like that. And toilets? Just forget it. Just miles and miles of roads, with waterlogged paddy fields on either side. We established the Bn HQ at Sidli, in a public health centre (PHC) complex that was not in use. The Companies were located in the vicinity of likely flashpoints, including one at a place called Ultapani. Once that was done, Col Agarwal could finally proceed on his well-earned but much-delayed leave.

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While Col Agarwal was on leave, I officiated as the CO. 8 SIKH LI is an excellent Battalion with well-laid-out SOPs. Moreover, Col Agarwal had fine-tuned it even more. I really did not have to do much, except to keep ensuring the standards that he had set. During this period, we were visited by the GOC 4 Corps, Lt Gen DB Shekatkar. This was the first time I would be briefing anyone so senior and I went over each and every aspect of the unit: operations, training, administration, finances, leaving no stone unturned, especially since 8 SIKH LI was relatively new to me. The briefing went off well (I think) and the Corps Commander asked me if I had any recommendations. Emboldened by his quiet and unassuming manner, I told him that this shifting of the unit every three months or so was affecting us adversely, both operationally and administratively. Operationally, we were unable to produce results because, by the time we settled down, got to know the terrain and developed some sources, we were packed off to some new location. Administratively, we were not given our due, not because no one wanted to, but by the time our projections were made and considered, we would have moved out. Gen Shekatkar saw the merit and logic in my arguments and asked his staff officer to make a note of it. Col Agarwal returned from leave shortly thereafter, and along with him came our next move order—back to Kathiatali!

Apparently, we had been moved out considering the area South of Nagaon to be dormant and the area was handed over to an Engineer Regiment. Some officers of this Regiment tried to do some undercover operation which backfired and they were both shot dead at point-blank range in the marketplace of one of the interior villages. It was several hours before anyone even came to know of such an incident, that too, through police channels. Hence, this order to move back

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forthwith. Just because an area is dormant does not mean the problem has gone away. It is dormant because of the intense domination and hold that the unit, any unit, has over the area, which 8 SIKH LI had succeeded in doing. At least for the rest of the field tenure, we would continue to stay there, but I wasn't around to see that either.

I had gone for a spot of leave in April 1999. We were at our house in Vasant Kunj, and some guests had come over for dinner. My friend Arwind Kundalkar, who was the staff officer to the Vice Chief of Army Staff (VCOAS) rang me up. He was a little hesitant on the phone, which was most unlike him. He told me that the result of our promotion board from Lt Col to Col had been declared but that I had not made the cut. I was absolutely shell-shocked and in a daze for the rest of the evening. I had everything going for me, done everything by the book, served all over the country, never refused any job, Staff College, Instructor gradings all around, BM and AQ, two of the most prestigious appointments—what more did the Army want? I would have been placed in 8 SIKH LI to take over in due course, only after an internal screening. Surely there must have been some mistake? I lay awake the whole night. Veena was the only one who understood the entire import of the result. She was a pillar of strength, talking to me gently the whole night, trying to soothe my distressed mind, which was in an absolute jumble of emotions. The next day was no better, my mind kept wandering—what could possibly have happened? Was I really such a *nikamma,* a useless, lazy and incompetent fellow? I tried my best to keep my equanimity, spending as much time as possible with Isha and Amala. They were too young to understand everything but knew that something was amiss.

Gen VP Malik of the SIKH LI was the COAS then. Col Ashok Kapur, who had been my CO, was on his staff

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as the assistant military adviser. Since I was in Delhi in any case, I went to meet him to seek his advice. He was also as shocked as anyone else, as I was considered to be a rising star of the Regiment. He told me that Gen Malik had been equally surprised at the outcome. He was certain that there was some aberration in my service profile, in my annual confidential reports (ACR), that needed looking into and advised me to file a non-statutory complaint. To seek redress from any perceived wrongdoing or harm is an accepted procedure and I did not have to shy away from it. I remembered that my cousin, Sanjay Naravane, had also not been approved but he had been too much of a 'gentleman', accepted the decision and moved on with his life. Col Kapur was not of that view, saying I must fight for my rights. When I told him that I didn't know the first thing about writing a complaint, he directed me to a Col Sakhuja who was then a Director in the Complaints and Advisory Board (CAB), which functions directly under the COAS.

The CAB deals with hundreds of complaints every year, mostly concerning supersession and being wrongfully harmed in the ACR. In processing each complaint, the Directors assigned to each individual case go into a lot of detail, not only of what is on the record but also off the record by digging deep into the background of the complaint, incidents involved, the reputation of the dramatis personae and so on, to form a more rounded picture. Over a period of time, especially when a number of complaints are received against the same superior officer, a pattern begins to emerge, suggesting that the complainant may be right in his apprehensions. The past profile of the complainant is checked and compared to see if there is a sudden spike or drop somewhere, showing either favouritism or vindictiveness. When I met Col Sakhuja, he asked me to narrate my record of service and any incidents that might have hurt my

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cause. I told him of my run-is with Brig Sandhu, the stressful tenure in Chakrata and about my brush with the Cdr during the Wardec exercise. He asked me about my course gradings and he too was surprised as to how I had got overlooked. It was all very generic; he had never met me before nor did he have any of my documents with him. He told me to make a simple complaint, just asking that my entire profile be reviewed and anything that seemed out of sync should be looked into.

I returned home somewhat lighter at heart. At least there was a plan to work on. On returning to the unit, I quickly wrote out the non-statutory complaint and put it into the pipeline. I also applied for study leave, to pursue a diploma in computer applications, which was granted. The Kargil War had just got over, so there were no longer any restrictions on leave, postings, courses, etc. I came to Delhi and secured admission to a computer course run by the Electronics Trade and Technology Development Corporation Ltd, at Malcha Marg, New Delhi. If I was going to be overlooked, I wasn't going to hang around. I was still young, not yet forty years old, and there were many more avenues to pursue. I spent a peaceful year in Delhi. I had shot my bolt by filing the complaint. My mind was at peace. I attended my classes, played golf, helped the kids with their homework, went to PTA meetings—I did everything possible that was non-military. Rita had got an assignment translating articles from Marathi to English, which she would do by hand. I would then type it up on the computer and send it by email to the DPR. I would also spend time with my father-in-law who was doing arbitration work, being acceptable and sought-after by both the MES as well as the contractors for the honest reputation he had while in service.

By March of 2000, my complaint had been processed and redress given. It was the Cdr from the Meerut tenure who had

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done the dirty, not having liked my walking out on him. I did what I thought was right and he did what he thought was right, but there was a system of checks and balances in place to cater for exactly such situations. The entire CR was expunged from my record and when the next SB was held, I sailed through and was cleared for the rank of Colonel, with my original seniority. If I got through this year with my head held high, it was only due to the support and love of my family. In fact, Isha and Amala even got me to sign an undertaking, written on a sheet of paper torn from their notebook, that I would never ever leave the Army. The one thing I realized was that it doesn't matter whether you are a Major or a Colonel—your wife and kids love you, not your rank.

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2.5

Battalion Command: Iron Fist in a Velvet Glove

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In the summer of 2000, I had just been posted as the GSO 1 (Training) to the Sikh Light Infantry Training Centre at Fatehgarh, Uttar Pradesh. Fatehgarh is a mofussil town halfway between Agra and Kanpur, which the world seems to have given a go-by. I had been posted there earlier in the late 1980s as the Adjutant of the Training Centre and nothing much seemed to have changed in the intervening two decades.

My daily routine was to go around the training areas in the early hours of the day, before it got too hot, supervise the day's activities and then retreat to the relatively cooler climes of the office to do the routine paperwork. I say relatively, because we did not even have the luxury of air conditioners back then. One morning, barely a week after I had assumed charge, I was at the short-range both supervising and doing some firing myself, when the office runner came frantically in search of me saying that I had an urgent call from the Colonel of the Regiment. The COR then was Maj Gen Ashok Kapur, and I had been his

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Adjutant in the unit when he was the Commanding Officer. We shared an excellent rapport and I looked forward to chatting with him.

On reaching the office and after taking a cool drink of water, I asked the exchange to put the call through. And then came the bombshell. 'Manoj,' said Gen Kapur after the initial exchange of pleasantries, 'I am sending you to 2 RR (Rashtriya Rifles) as the Commanding Officer. Be prepared to move at short notice.' I was dumbstruck as a thousand thoughts swirled through my mind. It is the dream of every officer to command the unit one is commissioned into—in my case, 7 SIKH LI. I had been approved for the select rank of Colonel earlier that year and was looking forward to rejoining my unit, and had even been formulating some plans on what to do. The unit, the paltan, is your family. Over the years, we had been together everywhere, from Sikkim to Bikaner, from Kargil to Trincomalee in Sri Lanka. I knew my boys and they knew me. To leave all that and to go to an entirely new unit and to start afresh? That's so unfair!

I tried in vain to reason with Gen Kapur. 'Sir,' I remonstrated, 'I was your Adjutant, your right-hand man, and Pune type to boot, you cannot do this to me.' Gen Kapur was unmoved. I had no choice but to accept his decision, as I had done once earlier too and it had been to my benefit. In 1986, we were on routine exercises in Sikkim. We were camped somewhere close to Nathu La, at a height of about 10,000 feet. It was end-September, early October and already bitterly cold, with a faint dusting of snow on the mountain tops. In the snow tent that was our Mess, Col Kapur had come in one evening waving two posting orders, both for me, to two different places. He was fuming, because he had, in fact, requested that since the unit had just moved into a new location, the team should remain

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unchanged for some time. Showing me both the orders, he had asked me for my choice, but in all fairness, never tried to cancel either of them. I had said then that I would go wherever he felt was best, and that's how I had landed up in Fatehgarh in 1987. My elder daughter Isha was born during that tenure and I had the pleasure of seeing her growing up, along with sleepless nights and changing nappies. I had gone for the Junior Command course from Fatehgarh, an important career course and secured an instructional 'I' grading, which not only changed my career profile but paved the way for my clearing the DSSC entrance exam a few years later. So, who was I to argue with Gen Kapur? 2 RR it was then.

The Rashtriya Rifles was a force created in 1990 specifically to deal with counter-insurgency/counterterrorist (CI/CT) operations and was the brainchild of the then COAS. 2 RR was among the first of the Battalions to be raised, on 1 October 1990. The organizational structure of the RR was still quite fluid but stabilizing. Each Battalion had four Companies worth of troops from the primary arm, one of the Infantry Regiments and two Companies worth from a secondary arm—armour, artillery, engineers, etc. The supporting elements were also drawn from respective support services—ASC, EME AMC, etc. Thus, an RR Battalion was like a microcosm of the Army. All the existing units of the Army sent their personnel to their affiliated RR units as per the vacancies allotted. 2 RR was a combination of the SIKH LI and Bombay Sappers. Over time, the RR had become an outlet where units could send their problem cases, those with attitude or disciplinary records. I, too, had been guilty of getting rid of some of my recalcitrant jawans from 7 SIKH LI to the RR. Imagine my surprise and chagrin, when I was confronted by some of those very same boys when I reported to 2 RR. They had a glint in their eyes which seemed to convey, that I too,

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was a disciplinary case like them, banished to the boondocks. Something like our equivalent of the French Foreign Legion.

I used this analogy in my first Sainik Sammelan, my address to the troops. We were strangers to each other, except for the few 'stalwarts' from my own Lucky Seven. At the outset, I told them that I was donning the mantle of CO 2 RR, not CO 7 SIKH LI. Each one of them was equally dear to me irrespective of which arm and service they came from. There would be no favouritism; this last was more directed towards my 'boys' from Seven: they should not expect any special treatment. Finally, I told them that the past is the past, no questions asked, and that I would judge them solely on their performance in 2 RR and their loyalty to our unit. That we were all part of a bright new team with a bright new future. This was an opportunity for them to chart a new course and on completion of their deputation, return to their parent units with their heads held high, perhaps even with a gallantry award to boot.

Over the next few days as I visited each Company in turn, I could feel that the men were weighing me up to see whether I would 'walk the talk'. I went with each Company for a planned ambush or area domination patrol (ADP) led by the Company Commander, both by day and night. This allowed me to gauge the standards of each Company as well as the Company Commander himself. Also, the battle procedures and battle drills, and what more needed to be done to improve operational effectiveness. I did not interfere in the conduct at all but participated as an observer, just another member of the patrol. The only time I did intervene was on one occasion when I knew that we had gone off-course and were heading in the wrong direction. How did I know? Because I had made the same mistake in navigation as a young Lieutenant in the deserts of Rajasthan, of not trusting your compass. Experience and lessons learnt the hard way.

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2 RR was located (and still is) on the outskirts of Srinagar, at Shalateng/Sharifabad, opposite the HMT factory. In fact, our Officers' Mess was the HMT guest house within a rose garden. The main office and headquarters though, were in a converted poultry farm, not so rosy after all! The men's living lines had a screen of wire meshing, good for keeping the chickens in, but not for keeping bullets out. Except for the HQ elements, the rest of the Companies were deployed to cover the entire Area of Responsibility (AOR). The AOR stretched from Bemina in the South on the Srinagar–Baramulla highway to where it crossed the Firozpora Nullah to the North-west, and from Magam in the East on the Gulmarg–Narabal highway up to the banks of the Jhelum River in the West. In early 2000, units were still getting redeployed post the Kargil War. The requirement of sending additional forces to the Kargil sector had left a void in the hinterland that had been fully exploited by various terrorist *tanzeems* (groups), to consolidate their positions. The first and foremost priority was therefore to re-establish a coordinated CI/CT grid and then carry out relentless operations to neutralize as many terrorists as possible.

One benefit of having gone around with each Company was that I had gained a fair idea of the topography and more importantly, the demographics. Which areas were more likely to witness terrorist activity, flashpoints, areas of the highway more vulnerable to attacks by improvised explosive devices (IEDs); Black (compromised), Grey (neutral) and White (sympathetic) villages, over ground workers (OGWs) actively supporting terrorists and the like. All these details were absolutely essential for the planning and conduct of operations. How does an operation unfold? Let me give a real feel of the action.

* * *

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Jameel

Jameel and Farooq sat in front of me in my office. I really did not know what to make of these two Kashmiri men. Jameel, a short athletic type with a well-trimmed beard, and Farooq, lanky, with an unkempt beard and a cunning look in his eye. Jameel, a little taciturn; Farooq the more loquacious. This, I was to learn later, was only because Jameel could not speak Hindi as fluently as his friend. Neither were Jameel and Farooq their real names. These were their aliases adopted while working as informers for the Army. These identities were so deeply ingrained that even their family members and friends called them by these names. Even their mothers called them thus.

But that cloudy day, only a few days after I had assumed command of 2 RR, they had something important to tell me. I still could not figure them out, much less make head or tail of what they were trying to say. I called for my Adjutant and asked him to clarify. Jameel elaborated, which was translated by Farooq.

'There is a group of terrorists in village Lawepura,' said Farooq, with that cunning look of his coming to the fore.

'How do you know?' asked Maj Rehan Durrani, my Adjutant. Another flurry of questions and answers ensued between Jameel and Farooq, before the latter replied.

'Jameel's mother's sister lives in that village,' said Farooq. 'She had gone to visit her and her sister told her.'

'So, the terrorists are in Jameel's aunt's house, right?' I intervened.

'No. Actually, the aunt had gone to visit another friend who is sick; she saw the terrorists in that friend's house. When she came back, she told Jameel's mother, who on returning home told Jameel,'—who told us, I said to myself.

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Rather a tenuous link I contemplated, as Rehan continued his debriefing. I let the conversation ebb and flow over me as I mulled over possible options. Lawepura was one of those 'black' villages on the Srinagar–Baramulla highway. There had been stray incidents of stone-throwing at Army convoys passing through, and once even one instance of grenade-throwing. So, the probability of terrorists having taken shelter there was high. It was already late afternoon. Dusk would be upon us soon, earlier than usual because of the dark clouds. Go in now on this third- and fourth-hand information, with a hint of rain to complicate matters? How trustworthy were these guys? I hadn't even known of their existence until a few days ago. Although I knew of the village, having driven past it a few times, I did not know its exact layout.

'Where exactly is this friend's house?' I asked.

'In Dar Mohalla, next to the masjid.' That wasn't of much use, since I knew neither the *mohalla* nor the masjid. I tried another track. 'So, what exactly did this friend see and what did she tell Jameel's aunt?'

Painstakingly, the story emerged. The aunt had gone to visit her ailing friend. She had sensed a palpable tension in the house. There had been furtive looks and whispered conversations. Finally, the patient herself had told her not to tarry and to go home quickly. As she was leaving, she had indeed come across a young man, not of the household. And the clinching evidence—this young man had not known Kashmiri! Well, the ball was certainly in my court. This is when Jameel stepped in. Signalling for a paper and pen he swiftly drew some bold lines. Placing his sketch on my ornate walnut-wood table, he motioned to me to listen. In a mixture of Hindi and Urdu, he explained:

'This is the village; this is the main road, the masjid, the target house. In case they try to get out, this is the route they

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will follow. Place your cordon along these paths. One party should come with me and we will head straight for the target house. If we take three Companies, they should be adequate to do the job.' Hold your horses, I thought to myself. Who is commanding here? After all, if things went wrong, it is I who would be answerable. Jameel, I think, sensed my apprehensions.

'Sahib, please. We must go and go in now. Morning will be too late.'

'Why?'

'They have been there the entire day,' reasoned Jameel. 'They have been seen by others. A quick meal and the moment it's dark, they will move out.'

'What makes you say so?'

'Sahib,' he replied, with a look of resignation, 'I was a militant myself, once upon a time. I know. Trust me.'

So now I was to trust a militant! Someone I had met only a few hours earlier. And on his advice, launch an operation on questionable intelligence, with darkness only a few hours away, which in itself was against conventional military wisdom. Could we be walking into a trap? My Adjutant, Rehan, was doing a Bernard à la *Yes Minister*. He had supplied all kinds of bits and pieces of information—the number of houses in the village, its demographics, name of the *mukdam* or village elder and a long list of suspects—but nothing that enabled me to make a decision. I looked out of the window at the cloudy, thunderous sky.

No inspiration there.

I looked once again at this dubious duo. Farooq was at his fidgety best. Jameel sat quietly, looking at me; ready to answer my questions and help me to make up my mind. I saw in him a professional, with a steely resolve and a sense of commitment. The intelligence was tenuous, true, but at least it

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was something to go on. And if we did not go ahead, would we retain the trust of these patriotic young men who were risking their lives to help us out? Would they come to us again or think it to be a waste of time? We needed to give it a try, if only to show our support to these brave youngsters. Jameel's quiet demeanour and intensity of involvement tipped the balance. I gave the executive orders for the plan as outlined by him—task, troops and timings—and Rehan hurried out to pass them to the operational Companies.

The operation was an unqualified success. The cordon parties approached from three different directions under the cover of darkness, the furthermost one first. One party along the main highway, another along a drain that bisected the village, a third in the fields on the fringes of the village. As the main group rushed towards the target house, the terrorists made a break for it, firing wildly in all directions, exactly along the route Jameel had predicted, straight into the trap laid for them. A volley of fire from our side and then deathly silence. A search of the area revealed that we had killed two foreign terrorists of the dreaded Lashkar-e-Toiba group and injured another, who later succumbed to his injuries. This tanzeem was made up mostly of mercenaries from Pakistan and other Islamic countries, including Afghanistan, and which would, post 9/11, be banned by the US. Amidst the congratulations, backslapping and general bonhomie following a successful operation, I could not but help think that the credit was entirely Jameel's. It was his sensibleness and self-belief that had given me the determination, courage and resolve to go ahead, and not the Adjutant's inconsequential titbits of information.

Three months later, Jameel was dead.

Shot dead by terrorists on the first day of the new year, while having his morning cup of tea. In full view of his family.

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Betrayed by members of his own village. Too canny and cautious to stay overnight in his own home, Jameel would always stay in safe houses in various neighbouring villages. Nobody knew where he would be. We could never contact him—he would contact us. Even his buddy Farooq would not know where he would be spending the night. But fate had caught up with him and he had been betrayed.

A few days later, I went to pay my condolences. Before entering the village, which had been secured by my protection party, I stopped for a few moments beside a fresh grave, with an iron grill around it, painted green. Inside, a small headstone gave the essential details. Ghulam Qadir Bhat, born . . . died . . . just the essential details. Ghulam Qadir Bhat. Though we had met often following that first meeting, I had never asked him his name. Nor had he ever volunteered the information. He was just Jameel to one and all. Another foot soldier in the war against terrorism. But Ghulam Qadir Bhat was a person, with parents, brothers, sisters. All of a sudden, I dreaded the idea of going into the village and facing his family members. What would I say to them?

Our arrival outside Jameel's house brought on a crowd of onlookers. Curious housewives, excited children always on the lookout for something to break their dreary routine, and sullen, suspicious men who eyed us from a safe distance. We sat outside in the pale morning sun. I offered my condolences through my interpreter, Manzoor, a Subedar from the JAK LI. I looked at each one of them. Jameel's frail mother, crying inconsolably; his aged father, gazing around incomprehensibly in a state of shock, puffing away on his hookah; two sisters, young and unmarried; a younger brother, Bashir, who would now have to take over the responsibility that had been Jameel's, but he did not have the same confidence. Here was a family that had

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suffered such a grievous loss, but they had not forgotten to look after their guest. There was kahwa, dry fruits and an assortment of biscuits. Kashmiris are known for their hospitality and this was ample proof of it. That first visit was awkward, but it helped show that we cared.

I visited them many times after that to see how they were getting along. On Jameel's first death anniversary, I made it a point to drop in on them. By now, the people had got used to my visits. The village children would crowd around my vehicles waiting for the toffees I customarily distributed at the end of each visit. On the occasion of Eid, I gave them some ready money so that they could buy themselves new clothes and celebrate in a befitting manner. Before long, they had all become part of my extended circle of friends. Clasping my hand in hers, Jameel's mother would reminisce.

'Jameel was such a good boy. He was not like the others who go around extorting money. Now who will look after us?'

'*Mauji*, don't worry. We are here to look after you. Jameel was one of us, like one of my jawans. We'll look after you.'

'But you'll go one day. Then who will care for us? Only you recognize how much Jameel was worth.'

This was true in a way and very perceptive of the old lady. I would finish my tour of duty one day and push off to greener pastures. They would be the ones left behind, fighting their lonely battle. During the past ten years, they must have seen many officers like me come and go. Some must have been well-intentioned, others perhaps not. Theirs was an uncertain future but life had to go on. They would only be left with memories of times not long past when Kashmir was indeed paradise on earth.

* * *

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The Battalion was deployed astride the Srinagar–Pattan–Baramulla and Srinagar–Narabal–Gulmarg roads. The Srinagar–Narabal stretch of the road was a very picturesque tree-lined avenue and its claim to fame was that the song '*Subhanallah Haseen Chehra*' from the film *Kashmir Ki Kali* had been shot here. The Companies were located at Company-operating bases (COB) at Khanpeth in the North, Dagerpura, on the banks of the Jhelum, Bemina, just on the outskirts of Srinagar, Soyibug (Dharmuna), Narabal and Malamu, the last two on the Narabal–Gulmarg Road, with the Bn HQ at the HMT. To the West of the main road was the Hokar Sar—a large wetland extending from North of the HQ all the way to Narabal and Soyibug, where migratory birds would come in the winters. The Hokar Sar was not very deep, but overgrown with reeds and rushes, ideal for ducks and other birds to hide in. During winters, the locals would often go poaching in its waters in their small flat-bottomed boats.

Soyibug was the ancestral village of Syed Salahuddin, the founder of the Hizbul Mujahideen (HM). He was in Pakistan, but the writ of the HM ran strong in this area, luring many youths to join the outfit. Soyibug was a 'Black' village, i.e., totally anti-government and pro-separatist. The Dharmuna COB was located bang in the middle of the village with the houses of the locals crowding it from three sides. Of all the COBs, this was the most vulnerable. The locals, egged on by the terrorists, would often pelt stones on the post from the cover of these houses or carry out stand-off firing from the fields on the open side. Even when inside the post, one could not relax and had to continuously wear protective gear, a bullet-proof jacket (BPJ) and a helmet at all times. The jawans had to have nerves of steel to not react to these provocations, which had the potential to cause serious collateral damage. During my term as the CO, the

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Company was variously commanded by Maj SBS Rana, AK Pundir and SK Pandey.

The foremost terrorist 'leader' in this area was a young lad named Mustafa Khan, hailing from the village of Goigam in the AOR of Malamu COB. He had the image of part *goonda* (thug), part Robin Hood. Such was his writ that the entire swath South of the Narabal–Magam road would follow his diktats. Since he and his gang of four to six terrorists would only move at night, he had passed 'orders' that all villages would have a curfew from dusk to dawn. Such was the fear factor that this diktat was followed without a murmur. Anyone not toeing the line would be considered a *mukhbir*, an informer, and summarily shot. Nobody was spared, not even women or children. Obviously, this was not a situation that could be allowed to continue. The very purpose of our deployment was to create conditions of normalcy and this state of affairs was nothing but outright terrorism, of forcing an entire population into submission at gunpoint. Apprehending Mustafa Khan became the priority for the Battalion. Every scrap of information was fed into a database: friends and relatives, girlfriends and class fellows, known associates, last known location and activity (intimidation, extortion, grenade-throwing, killing, etc.). Gradually, an intelligence picture built up.

At last, I felt that we were ready to strike and passed orders for a cordon and search operation targeting two to three most likely hideouts. After the briefing, Capt. Rajeev Bahuguna, commanding the Echo Company COB at Malamu, came to my office along with the 2iC. Rajeev presented his case against launching the operation that night. He had been working hard on catching Mustafa Khan, 'got into his head', so to say. Rajeev was sure that on the coming Friday, he would certainly go to his father's village not only for the Friday prayers but also because

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of the forthcoming birthday of one of his siblings. Rajeev pleaded with me to delay the operation by forty-eight hours. 'I'll get him for you,' he said with determination. I looked over at my 2iC, who concurred with this assessment. 'Let's delay it,' he said. The Company Commanders had already been briefed, orders would remain unchanged; the only difference being that we would go in on the night of Thursday/Friday. In fact, added the 2iC, the terrorists would have been alerted that something was in the offing, since all the Company Commanders had assembled at the HQ, hence the delay might actually lull them into a false sense of security. And that is exactly what happened.

Mustafa Khan

The trap was sprung at the crack of dawn. The counterterrorist troops under my command that had been lying in wait all night in the emerald green paddy field rose as one and moved towards the suspect village. As they closed in, there was a flurry of movement inside the hamlet. The Company Commander, Capt Rajeev Bahuguna radioed me that he was moving in. Coming across a maulvi who had gone to the mosque to give the morning call to prayer, he asked him, '*Baba, kya dalel cheu*?' (Father, all is well?).

The old man was too petrified to answer even this simple greeting. The officer knew he had hit pay dirt. '*Baba*, what is the matter?' he asked. 'Is there anyone in the mosque?' The poor man did not know what to say. Besides being a maulvi, he had performed the Haj as well. He did not want to lie outright.

'*Beta*, it was dark when I went to the mosque. How would I know?'

'But do you guarantee that there is no one inside the mosque?' insisted Rajeev.

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'*Beta*, what guarantee is there in these troubled times? While we stand and talk, anyone could have gone anywhere.'

His suspicions confirmed, Rajeev rushed in and cordoned off the mosque. His tentative inquiry, 'Anyone there?' was met by a hail of gunfire. What should he do now? We were under strict instructions not to defile any place of worship. Additional troops were called in and sharpshooters were positioned at vantage points. Village elders were summoned to try and persuade the terrorists to surrender. They confirmed that Ghulam Mustafa Khan, a dreaded category 'A' terrorist hailing from the same village, was holed up inside. However, the mukdam and other elders were not able to convince them to surrender. Mustafa Khan's parents were summoned to try their luck. Mustafa's mother had tears streaming down her face. She knew that this script had only one ending. Mustafa once again refused to surrender. We had no choice but to match deed for deed, fire with fire. A few hours later, Mustafa and two of his accomplices lay dead inside the compound of the mosque, killed while trying to break through the cordon. Barely out of their teens, the three had chosen a path that had only brought death and destruction in its wake. And now, they were the victims. In the exchange of fire, Capt Bahuguna was critically injured and evacuated by helicopter to the 92 Base Hospital at Srinagar.

As we disengaged from the village, the villagers turned hostile. Egged on by Mustafa's father Razzaq Khan and his vociferous daughters, the crowd chanted anti-India and anti-Army slogans. Keeping our cool, we disengaged without any mishaps. But in our hearts lurked a little bitterness. We had done our job. Observed all the rules of civilized warfare. Even asked the terrorists to surrender so that their lives be spared. Suffered a casualty ourselves. Then why was there this outpouring of bitterness against us? During the post-operation

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debriefing, this topic came up again. We resolved to go deeper into the matter.

As luck would have it, we got some intelligence only a few weeks later of a cache of arms in the same village. The cache was uncovered and several weapons, explosives and devices to remotely detonate explosive devices were recovered from the fields belonging to Razzaq Khan. As the owner of the fields, we had no choice but to arrest him for offences under various laws of the land. Once again, the crowd turned hostile. This time it was an all-women crowd. I hastily called for the mukdam and with his help, we managed to pacify the throng. Slowly, I explained to them that we were doing our job. They could come over the next day and meet Razzaq Khan. I gave them my personal guarantee that no harm would befall him. Not entirely convinced, the women went back to their homes, still a little agitated. We returned to the Company post at Malamu, near Magam.

That evening, Razzaq Khan was debriefed in detail. What did he know of this cache? How had it got there, camouflaged under stalks of maize? Why had his son joined militancy? Killed so many people wantonly? These and a host of other questions crowded my mind. I genuinely wanted to know why so many youngsters had chosen the path of violence and taken recourse to the gun. What was the motivation? Why had he not tried to talk sense into his only son? Or did he too secretly support the so-called cause? Over cups of tea and plates of pakoras, we talked late into the night. 'Mustafa was a very bright child,' said Razzaq. 'We had so many hopes for him. As the baby of the family and the only son, he was showered with affection by his mother and sisters. He was a dutiful son but a little headstrong.'

I had to agree with him. Mustafa had certainly been a brainy chap. He had given us and the police the slip many a time. Sometimes posing as a school-going twelfth grader,

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sometimes brazenly walking past our check-post after showing the jawan on duty a fictitious identity card, or wearing a burkha. In one particularly ruthless attack, he had remotely blown up an ice-cream trolley packed with explosives, killing seven security forces personnel on the spot. That the ice-cream vendor was also blown up was of no concern to him. Such acts had made him notorious and high on the police wanted list. I asked Razzaq about these traits.

'Sahib, he had no choice,' he said. 'Once he took up the gun, he had to spread terror. That was the only way he could remain safe; only if the people feared him more than the police or the Army. He made a reputation for himself and then he had to live up to that reputation.'

'Yes, but why did he pick up the gun in the first place?'

'Sahib, you only tell me. I am a poor man. About seven or eight years ago, there was this police informer called Mir. He had spread a reign of terror in our area. Under the pretext of working for the police, he used to extort money from all of us. If we did not oblige, he would give the police some fictitious information and that person would be picked up by them, sometimes never to be seen again. I too was picked up but released. After my release from custody, Mir came to my house again late one night and demanded one lakh rupees. Where was I to get so much money from? When I told him I could not pay up,' sobbed Razzaq, his frail body convulsing, 'he demanded my wife.'

Putting an arm around his shoulders, I listened as he continued his tale.

'Mustafa was but a boy of fourteen when this happened. And when that monster came back again a few days later and tried to molest my elder daughter, it was too much for Mustafa. He joined the militants and was sent to Pakistan.'

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'What year was that?' I asked him, trying to get things in the right perspective. 'Didn't you try to stop him?'

'Sahib, Mustafa tried to kill Mir in order to redeem our family honour but did not succeed. After that, he was branded for life. What choice did he have?'

The anguish and pain in the old man's eyes was all too evident. I could not but help commiserate with him. He had lost a son and I had one of my officers seriously injured in the same encounter.[1] We were both husbands and fathers. The cross was for us to bear. What is right and what is wrong is not for us mere mortals to decide. Razzaq's wife, Roja, and daughters Javeeda and Chaspeeda came to our camp at Malamu the next day looking as anxious as ever. I can imagine they must have spent a sleepless night imagining all kinds of untold horrors that Razzaq might have been going through at our ruthless hands. After seating them on a bench outside the camp (women were never brought into the camp), we asked them a few questions to verify some of the facts given to us by Razzaq. Once satisfied, we brought Razzaq out and reunited him with his family. A faintly worried smile creased Roja's face. One could make out that she must have been a beauty in her younger days. Her daughters were also equally pretty, but Roja outshone them. Some of what Razzaq had told me the previous night made sense. There was a flurry of conversation which we tried to decipher. We could make out a few words. Razzaq turned to us with a smile.

'They are asking me if I have been harmed. I've told them that I have been treated well. We are all grateful.'

'Why should we have harmed him?' I asked Roja.

Chaspeeda, the younger daughter who knew a little Urdu, answered, 'My father has been picked up several times because of Mustafa. He has always been beaten up by the security forces,

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trying to extract information regarding my brother. Nobody would believe us when we used to tell them that we do not know. Mustafa knew that we were the prime suspects so he would never tell us anything.'

'Then where have these arms and ammunition come from, which we recovered from your fields?'

'We do not know. I swear by the name of Allah that my father is innocent.'

I pounced on this statement. 'That means one of you is involved. Mustafa's associates must have been coming to you and asking you to run errands for them. To act as couriers for them.' The last part was a bit of a bluff, the effect of watching too many detective serials on TV.

'No, No. None of us is involved,' she replied emphatically. 'There was a rumour once that a girl in a burkha was running errands and the finger of suspicion pointed towards us. But once, when the girl was unveiled by mistake, it transpired that she was from a neighbouring village.'

I asked Razzaq for the details of the girl and the village and handed it over to my second-in-command, Lt Col Narendra Parmar to run a detailed check with the police. He came back a little while later. Yes, there was a girl by that name in the village and it was said that she was sweet on Mustafa. The story could well be true. Everything seemed to be checking out, but how would we account for the weapons we had recovered the previous day? And what was I to do with Razzaq Khan? Book him, an innocent man? Or leave him, to fight us again another day? Decisions, decisions!

While the family sat and chatted outside the post, we retired inside for some serious discussions. The Company Commander, Maj AS Pundir, who had nabbed Razzaq, was dead set against letting him go. He wanted to book him with everything under

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the sun. Narendra was more pragmatic and from our days in Lucky Seven, I knew I could count on him.

'Sir,' he said, 'we should let him off. There is nothing much against him. Anyone can come and bury anything in someone's fields. It isn't as if we have found the items inside his house.'

'What will we gain from it?' countered Ajay, the Company Commander.

'A lot of goodwill. If we book Razzaq, what will happen to his wife and kids? They will become even more vulnerable to the terrorists. You've seen what the daughters look like. Do you think anyone will leave them alone?'

'Even I tend to agree with that,' I offered. 'While Mustafa was alive, nobody would have dared to touch them. But now, let alone the terrorists, even the police and other sundry agencies will get after them.'

Ultimately, we decided to let him off. Razzaq and family could hardly believe their ears. Razzaq kissed me on the forehead—a mark of great respect. Roja stroked Parmar's chin—a mark of respect and forgiveness. The daughters appointed us their honorary *mamas* or uncles. The mood was altogether different from what it had been when they had come initially. We were friends now. As they left the post, we definitely felt we had done our duty. Our duty to that final arbitrator above.

We continued to meet off and on. On the occasion of Eid, Razzaq came to the camp on his own with some chicken specially made for us by his daughters. On another visit, with some walnuts and other fruits from his farm. We too reciprocated. When he visited the next time, I sent a return gift of some perfumes, lipsticks and other cosmetics for Javeeda and Chaspeeda—they were my nieces, after all!

* * *

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Captain Rajeev Bahuguna was seriously injured during this operation, when a stray splinter severed his windpipe and lodged in his spine, paralysing him from the waist down. He was the only casualty suffered by the security forces, contrary to reports appearing in many local dailies. For his role in the operation, he was later awarded the Sena Medal (Gallantry). Rajeev spent months and years in rehabilitation in Pune, never losing hope and always maintaining his cheerful demeanour. I visited him often, as did my mother, in the Military Hospital, Kirkee, Pune, keeping him motivated. He later married Capt Lucy, the nurse who used to care for him, and they were blessed with a daughter, Riddhima, in 2006. The Army wanted to board him out on medical grounds, but we fought his case for retention with the full support of the GOC, CIF (K), initially Maj Gen Dalbir Singh (PARA) followed by Maj Gen S Yadav (RAJ RIF). The Army never abandons anyone.

Not all stories had a happy ending. On one occasion, an area domination patrol (ADP), while on the banks of the Hokar Sar, saw some suspicious movement in the early morning mist. There were two or three people in a small boat, armed with weapons. The ADP challenged the unidentified group who, save for one person, dived into the icy waters, whereupon the party opened fire. The Company Commander radioed me and I immediately left for the spot. A search of the area after daybreak revealed that the boatman, who had his back to the ADP, had died. The SHO from the nearest police station was called for, who carried out his own investigation, interacting with the locals. It transpired that a few youths had gone poaching in the Hokar Sar armed with small calibre rifles and shotguns. On being challenged, they had escaped by jumping into the water and had since returned to their homes, much to the relief of their parents. The boatman was a deaf-mute from the nearby village,

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who had not heard the challenge, nor seen the ADP since he had his back towards them. While the others had jumped out, he had innocently stayed in the boat and got shot. A most tragic and unfortunate incident. No terrorist angle there. An act carried out in good faith by the ADP in the discharge of their duties, with no malicious intent or premeditation. The village folk were called together and the SHO explained the chain of events. The villagers were understandably agitated but also knew that their boys were at fault and guilty of poaching. Reports were submitted up the Army chain of command and included in the daily sitrep. We did not try to hide the facts or to show it as an 'encounter', in order to avoid any censure for having caused the death of an innocent civilian. An FIR was filed, investigated and disposed of as per the law of the land. No one was punished or censured for doing his duty. More importantly, the Army chain of command understood the ambiguous nature of the rules of engagement and that there was no premeditation or mala fide intent.

On another occasion, the fallout was even worse. We were carrying out a cordon and search operation at Trigam, another 'black' village in the Alpha Company's AOR. It was a big village, divided into a number of mohallas, sub-divisions, each having more than a hundred houses. It was a Battalion-sized operation; four Companies in the cordon and three to four search parties per Company. As per the practice, the villagers were asked to vacate their houses and assemble in designated areas in each of the mohallas. A head count was taken and all missing persons were accounted for—those who had gone out for work or studies, etc. Once the search commenced, anyone still lurking about in any of the houses would be considered hostile. The search got underway in all its tediousness. House by house, never knowing when or where someone would

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unleash a burst of fire on the search party. I would go around from time to time to ensure that protocols were being followed. Each search party was accompanied by one or two of the village elders as a precaution against any allegations being raised later of any wrongdoing by the search party, usually of theft. These elders would be the ones to sign the clearance certificate on the termination of the search.

About mid-day, there was a sudden murmur in the crowd. One of the search parties was nearing a particular house when the village elder accompanying them hesitated and said something that was picked up by the assembled villagers. That somehow spread to the other mohallas too and all of a sudden, the folk who had been sitting peacefully and resigned to this search grew agitated. We guessed that we were probably close to some terrorist hideout and this was a diversionary tactic. As the search progressed, the unrest increased. Some of the OGWs, terrorist sympathizers in the crowd, egged on the villagers, who started throwing stones and tried to break the cordon. The search was temporarily halted as we tried to pacify the crowd, who were shouting slogans with the women ululating in shrill, unnerving tones. Some of the bolder young people tried to storm forward and snatch our weapons. When that happened, we had no option but to open fire, first in the air and then on the miscreants themselves for our own safety and security. I sensed the situation was getting out of hand and decided to call off the operation. The search parties who were inside the village disengaged first, supported by the cordon party. Once at a safe distance, the cordon also disengaged. When the villagers saw that we were disengaging, they did not attempt to follow us, but we left behind six dead and an equal number of wounded villagers, not all of them blameless. Not a good operation at all. Some may even call it a botched operation.

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The next day, I went back to the village accompanied this time by the Sector Commander, Brig DC Katoch, a Kashmiri himself and the DC, Pattan, for some damage control. As it is, the senior hierarchy was quite unhappy with me for having called off the operation, bowing to civilian mob tactics. If this were now to flare up into a major human rights issue, there would surely be repercussions at the national level. We sat down with the village elders; they gave their version of the events and I gave mine—that the civilian deaths were a result of the grave provocation they had instigated. Brig Katoch reasoned with them, that we were doing our job and they needed to cooperate with us, or else the whole village would be branded as terrorists, ineligible for any welfare schemes. Even the Army would not help them, be it for emergency medical evacuation or a hundred other such things that neighbours do for each other. We were part of them; we had never harassed them or demanded any money or any other such petty acts of corruption. 2 RR particularly had a very good HR record. The DC also said some soothing words, assuring them of early settlement of their compensation claims and other benefits due to them but only if they agreed to behave. The elders had some counter-proposals; they would agree to not pursue the issue but only if we agreed to not carry out any operations in their village again any time in the future. This was a ridiculous proposal and rejected outright; they could not become an oasis of lawlessness in an already troubled state. Ultimately, they saw our point of view. We shared a cup of kahwa and some fried chicken—hospitality was always forthcoming among the Kashmiris, and we broke off, if not as friends, at least not as enemies. Another disaster was averted on account of the senior leadership providing much-needed support when needed and through good civil–military synergy. When you are doing your job, mistakes will occur.

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Was it a blatant act of HR violation or an honest mistake? It is for the senior leadership to see it in the correct perspective. Maybe I was just plain lucky—or was it just destiny?

* * *

Samra

During those days, we used to have some very rudimentary monitoring devices—AR 5000, if I remember correctly. These used to be deployed at various locations and gave out the bearings of any signal intercepts. Theoretically, by triangulation, one should have been able to pinpoint the location of the transmitter and then launch operations based on this signal intelligence, SIGINT, to nab the person doing the transmission. All good in theory, but in practice, the points never intersected but formed a triangle that could be of several square km, with dozens of houses and hundreds of people. One such call sign that used to appear repeatedly was Samra, a Pakistani national of the LeT. The calls would be at any time of the day and week but had one thing in common. The likely triangulated locations always came somewhere near the Battalion HQ, once even within the HQ location itself. Catching this elusive Samra, the local Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) leader became an obsession. We tried everything from spot searches to pre-positioning undercover search parties who would swoop down on the suspected location the moment the triangulation was received but to no avail. This cat-and-mouse game continued for many months with the GOC, Maj Gen Nirbhay Sharma, breathing down my neck, asking for results. The matter became even more serious when the suspect location was once plotted to be emanating from the K Force HQ itself. Something had to be done!

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One day, Narendra and I were sitting poring over our planning board. It was a simple thermocol sheet with the map of the AOR pasted on it with coloured pins showing the days of the various intercepts and their locations, with bits of string joining the pins to show the movement pattern. All very basic, no computer-generated programs or AI or anything. The civil phone rang; the exchange operator said that there was a civilian wanting to speak to me, who said, '*CO Sahib mere se zarur baat karenge*.' When I asked for the name of this civilian caller, the operator said it was someone called Samra. I couldn't believe my ears. When we got through, Samra said he wanted a face-to-face meeting and that I should come alone to such and such place. I had put the call on speaker and Narendra was listening in. I told Samra that I would call back on his number, displayed on the caller ID, a new thing those days. It could be a trap said Narendra, there's no way you can go alone. Better he should come to the camp gate. We conferred for a few minutes before calling back and making this offer.

'How do I know you won't kill me on sight?' countered Samra.

This discussion went on for some time. Finally, I told him that it was he who had rung up offering to surrender; the choice was his. He could get another person along as a witness to guarantee his safety.

The main gate of the camp had a visitors' room where civilians would come for some of their personal work or even for the odd purchase from the wet canteen run by the civilian contractor. This was a regular practice as it also gave a cover to those locals wanting to come to the camp with some information on terrorist activities. We asked Samra to merge with this stream of people and come the next day, and to ask for the 2iC on reaching the gate. There was an air of suppressed

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excitement the next day. My wife and children were with me at that time, it being the summer break, and they got caught up in the excitement too. This was something straight out of a 007 movie. At the appointed time, Narendra was hovering near the gate, ensuring that nothing should spook Samra at the last moment. No extra security or too vigorous checking of passers-by. I stayed close to the phone, in case of any last-minute change of plans. Everything went off smoothly and by early afternoon, Samra was in our custody. We debriefed him in detail but the question was what we should do with him. This was too important a matter to await the routine evening report, so I rang up the Sector Commander and the GOC. The GOC felt that we should try and turn him—make him a double agent. Release him back into the environment and establish a secure mode of communication through which Samra could give us hard, actionable intelligence of terrorists, based on which we could launch surgical, people-friendly operations, avoiding the tedium of long-drawn cordon and search operations.

It was a big risk to take, to release a graded terrorist who was already in the bag, back into the populace. Suppose he carried out some spectacular terrorist action resulting in massive casualties while pretending to work for us? It would be unforgivable. But the more we spoke with him, the more we realized that the fight had gone out of him. Our relentless chasing of call sign Samra had worn him down. Twice he had escaped by the skin of his teeth. He knew it was only a matter of time before he was captured or worse, killed. His coming over to us was therefore greatly as a result of our relentless efforts. He had also fallen in love with a local girl (whom he later married), and it was she who had motivated him to surrender. Moreover, he confessed that after seeing that way of life, he had realized how all the indoctrination that they had been given, of

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the rapes and murders and defiling of mosques, was untrue. He said that he was a regular at the local mosque to offer *namaz*, and he had never been harassed. All these factors contributed to his decision to surrender. After hearing all this, I recommended to the GOC that we should take the chance. Now that we knew what he looked like, it would be easier to apprehend him the next time around. We got the go-ahead and Samra went back to his 'home' in Umarabad Colony, barely three km away.

Over the next year or so, Samra continued to give us hard intelligence. We were careful to use him sparingly; we didn't want to kill the goose that was laying the golden eggs. Even when we had pinpoint intelligence, so-and-so house in so-and-so locality, we made a big show of carrying out the complete battle procedure. Cordoning off a set of houses and randomly searching them before zeroing in on the target house. This was once to have an unfortunate outcome because in one instance, while 'pretending' to question the owner of the house, the terrorists who were hiding in an underground hide opened fire through the floor of the house, grievously injuring Narendra, who fired back despite his injuries, killing the two terrorists below. He too, was later awarded the Sena Medal (Gallantry). In one operation carried out in the heart of Srinagar, we even killed a fair-skinned Canadian terrorist. These operations were over and above the other operations that we were carrying out by the traditional methods. Intercepts between the various tanzeems and particularly between the LeT itself, warned everyone to stay out of the 2 RR areas. It was recognition of the fear we had instilled in the minds of the terrorists. Of course, it was too good to last. The LeT carried out their own analysis and reached the only possible conclusion. One day, when Samra was out for an evening walk with his sister-in-law, he was gunned down by motorcycle-borne gunmen in the

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market area of Srinagar. Those who live by the sword shall die by the sword.

* * *

I had two sector commanders, in Brigs DC Katoch (Armoured) and Vicky Mehta (Armoured) and three GsOC, in Maj Gen Nirbhay Sharma (Para), Dalbir Singh (Para) and S Yadav (Raj Rif). All of them supported me to the hilt. I think I was lucky to have my immediate superiors from the Armoured Corps, as they did not interfere in the conduct of operations, trusting my better judgement as an Infantryman. They provided the higher direction and took care of the 'flak' in case of any adverse publicity or fall-out, as had happened at Trigam. Maj Gen Nirbhay Sharma was a hard task-master, who really pushed me hard to produce results, especially on the Samra case. Maj Gen Dalbir Singh was a more hands-on type, even reaching the site of ongoing encounters and joining in the operation, merrily chucking hand grenades into the target houses. Maj Gen S Yadav was a thorough gentleman, soft-spoken, who remained unfazed in any crisis. Of all the GsOC, I had the longest association with Maj Gen Dalbir Singh.

Brig Dalbir Singh had been the Commander of 71 Sub Area, located along with the Corps HQ at Srinagar. Once in the winter of 2001, we were conducting yet another operation in Lawepura village. While driving past that location, he saw this activity and though not in his charter, got down to have a look, asking one of the jawans to take him to the CO. I was somewhere in the middle of the village, wearing my BPJ and helmet, crouched down in the snow behind a stone wall, passing instructions on the radio set, when Brig Dalbir appeared from behind me and crouched down alongside.

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Although a bit irritated at this unwarranted intrusion, out of courtesy to a senior officer, I nevertheless gave him a briefing of the situation and we had a steaming cup of tea, warming our hands on the stainless-steel glasses. He left a few minutes later, wishing me luck. Imagine my surprise when a few weeks later he was posted as the GOC. I thanked my stars that I had been polite and briefed him properly. I think this incident had made a favourable impression on him, not only of the unit but also about me, having seen me there, crouched in the snow, leading from the front.

On one occasion, we had cordoned off a house in the heart of Srinagar. I was directing the proceedings from the first floor of an adjacent under-construction house. Maj Gen Dalbir joined me in the room overlooking the target house, standing behind the central pillar and peeking out through the windows on either side. A burst of fire came in through the windows, struck the wall in the rear and the splinters hit Maj Gen Dalbir in the back and rear. Nothing serious, but we had to pause the operation to administer some first aid, with me hinting to him that I had the situation under control and that he could return to his HQ. He left shortly thereafter, with strict instructions that this incident should not be part of the official after-action report. It would be bad for morale, he said, if reports went out that a GOC had been injured.

My class fellow, Col Sarwottam Hasabnis, was at the time commanding his unit (5 JAT) on the LC, as part of 19 Inf Div. Whenever he used to go on leave, he would stop over at my HQ before going to the airport to catch the civil flight to Delhi and onwards to Pune. On more than one occasion, I would get a call while we were at lunch that an encounter had broken out, which required my immediate presence. I would bid a quick farewell and move to the site, coming back only

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much later after the successful completion of the operation. On reaching Pune, Hasab would first call me, wanting to know the result of the operation—how many terrorists were killed? Two? Or three? When this happened more than once, we started considering him to be our lucky charm. If there were to be a lull in operations, Narendra, my 2iC, would request me to call Col Hasabnis over for lunch to break the dry spell.

Elections for the Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly were held in September–October 2002. The elections were in four phases, with the first phase on 16 September 2002 covering constituencies in the Battalion AOR. Polling booths were set up all over and classified as sensitive or hyper-sensitive, depending upon the local dynamics and perceived threats. This classification also helped us to focus our area domination efforts. The mandate given to us was very clear, namely, that we were to provide prophylactic security in our respective AOR, but we were not to go anywhere near any polling booth or carry out any activity that might be misconstrued as trying to sway or intimidate the voters. The day went by peacefully, without any untoward incident. I had been moving around throughout the day to the various Company locations, overseeing the security arrangements. By the evening, I had reached Magam and stayed there till the official polling time was over. The polling staff still had to wind up their things and that took another hour or so before they were ready to move back along with their EVMs, which incidentally had been used in J & K for the first time. Only then could we start closing in the ADPs, which were providing the prophylactic security. The ROPs would have to wait even longer, till the last of the vehicles had returned safely before they could be reeled-in. Having seen off the polling staff and their vehicles, I too started back in my Gypsy with my QRT comprising escorts front and back. As we were crossing

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the village of Chak Kawsa, short of Narabal, a grenade came sailing over from the right, bounced on the bonnet of my Gypsy before going into the bushes to the left of the road where it exploded harmlessly. The QRT swung into action, cordoning off the area and rushing into the lanes and by-lanes of the village, but the perpetrator had disappeared. The blast had been heard far and wide, and there were immediate inquiries about the cause. Since no harm had been done, we decided to pass it off as a tyre burst—not wanting to give unnecessary credit to the terrorists. 16 September is my father's birthday; maybe his Patronus was guarding me.

The months just went past in a blur. One operation after the other. Some hits and a few misses too, from which we learnt our lessons and improved our battle drills even more. In the January 2003 'Honours and Awards' list, I was awarded the Sena Medal (Distinguished). In February, I was nominated for the Higher Command course commencing in July, so that meant my tenure as a CO would come to an end. I enjoyed every moment and hour of my tenure. I am often asked which was my best tenure or which was the high point of my career. My answer, unhesitatingly, is the tenure when I had the honour and privilege of commanding 2 RR (SIKH LI).

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2.6

Look East: '*Mingala Bar Khimbya*'

I was nominated for the Higher Command (HC) in February 2003 while still in command of 2 RR. After handing over command to Col B Yadav in June, we proceeded by road to Delhi, via Jammu and Dehradun. Veena and the girls had come for the summer holidays, so we all drove down together in a civil car. The drive from Srinagar was out of the world. The countryside was picturesque, of course, but the sheer magnificence of range after range after range of mountains that make up the Himalayas was humbling. It made one realize how insignificant we are in the overall scheme of things. After an overnight halt at Jammu, we proceeded to Dehradun, where we were to stay with Maj Gen Ashok Kapur, who was then the deputy commandant of the Indian Military Academy. As it so happened, the passing-out parade (POP) for the spring term 2003 was scheduled for the next day, so we witnessed the parade as the special guests of the deputy commandant. Isha and Amala got to see from where I had been commissioned more than two decades earlier. We did not tarry long at Dehradun but left soon after the parade, as I wanted to reach Delhi before nightfall.

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By now, Isha was in the eleventh grade and had taken humanities as her stream. Mhow had an Army Public School, but unfortunately, it only offered the science and commerce streams. To pursue humanities, Isha would have to go to some school in Indore, entailing a commute of an hour or so each way. We were in a quandary as to what to do. Isha was not too keen to move out of Delhi either. She had made a place for herself at school and was even on the editorial board of the school magazine, *Aviral*. I went to the MS Branch to inquire whether it was possible to get a posting to Delhi on termination of the HC 32 course, in April 2004. After reviewing my profile, the extensive periods spent in field areas, particularly the CO's tenure, and the fact that I had never been posted to Delhi earlier, the MS Branch was pretty sure of being able to accommodate me in Delhi. Accordingly, we decided that I would go alone to Mhow, another ten months of separation, for the sake of the continuity of the children's education.

The ten months of the HC course passed off in a blur. This was the third course I was attending at the AWC, after JC and SC, and all three times, I had to come alone for some reason or the other. The best part of the HC course is the extensive travelling to all parts of India (foreign tours started from HC 33 onwards). We would visit each of the Corps of the Army, getting the operational briefings before moving down to Divisions and Brigades to get the actual feel of the ground. It is impossible for everyone to have served everywhere, so this familiarization was extremely illuminating. Tours to civilian and industrial establishments were also conducted, which broadened our horizons immensely. I was very impressed and captivated by the visits to the Bombay Stock Exchange and the Reliance offices at the Dhirubhai Ambani Knowledge City. Reliance was then laying miles and miles of optical fibre cables (OFC) and we

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were wondering why. The Army is just finishing laying its own OFC in 2023, twenty years later. They were definitely ahead of the times.

After the course, I was posted to the Perspective Planning Directorate in the Strategic Affairs Section as the Director, Concepts and Force Application, North (C&FA–N). Isha asked me how many men I had under my command (in RR, it was about 1200). I replied that it was just me and one clerk-cum-PA. Army HQ is a great leveller. The Director, North looked into the strategic issues affecting the national security of all the countries to our North and East, namely Nepal, Bhutan, China, Russia, and as far as Vietnam and Korea. The Director, West, Col Iqroop Ghuman, who had done the HC course with me, looked after Pakistan, Afghanistan, the CAR and CIS countries. The Director, Global, Col Madhok followed by Col Bhalla, looked after selected countries with which we had strategic interests: the US of course, but also Japan, Australia, France and the UK. The Director, Regional, a naval officer, looked after the countries in the Indian Ocean rim region, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Between the four of us, we pretty much had the whole world at our fingertips. The fifth officer, the Director, Force Structuring, Col Jagbir Singh, to whom we gave our inputs, would then try to analyse what our force levels should be. All four of us Army officers in the PP (Strategic) Section rose to the rank of Lt Gen—Iqroop and Madhok becoming Army Commanders, the former serving under me when I became the Chief.

In the Strat Section, we were supposed to think futuristically and out of the box. We had to read widely and between the lines. This involved reading research papers by various scholars, keeping track of what world leaders have said and in which forum and findings of various think tanks, attending seminars

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of interest, whether at the USI or IPCS or ORF, and meeting our own scholars (I used to interact most often with Dr Madhu Bhalla and Dr Shrikant Kondapalli, both China experts) to build a comprehensive picture of our assigned countries. Through my research, I deduced that China had downscaled the number of group armies (GA) within the People's Liberation Army (PLA) from twenty-one to nineteen, which created some ripples in the MO and MI Directorates. Following up on this, I also wrote a paper on the PLA's War Zone Concept (WZC), putting a different spin on how the battle is likely to unfold at the operational and tactical level. Yet another paper was on force structuring, on why and how, instead of raising additional Divisions (a proposal already in the pipeline) we should instead concentrate on acquiring more force multipliers and raising organizations such as Aviation Brigades, rather than manpower-heavy, conventional Divisions. When I presented this paper in the MO operations room, it was met with stunned silence, with someone quite senior in the audience remarking, 'Son, it is a very thought-provoking presentation, but we are well on the way of getting government sanction for the raising of two new Divisions, so please don't rock the boat', or words to that effect.

One day in late 2005, I had gone to attend a seminar somewhere and reached the office shortly before the lunch break. As soon as I reached, Iqroop told me that my name was being considered for a foreign posting and that I should ring up the MS Branch forthwith, even giving me the number of the officer I was to contact. I thought he was pulling my leg, as I had never been called for an interview before. We had our lunch discussing the seminar I had just attended and went back to work. When Iqroop saw that I wasn't reacting, he came over to my desk, rang up the officer and shoved the phone into my hand. It turned out to be true. I was required to give my consent,

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following which my name would be included in a panel of five officers for the post of Defence Attaché, Myanmar, with the interview scheduled just a few days hence. I went home that evening and discussed it with Veena, and came to the conclusion that there was no harm in going ahead.

The next few days I dug out whatever we had in the PP Dte on Myanmar. Other officers who were on the same panel also came over; they were mostly my batchmates, and we tried to assimilate (cram) as much information as possible. On the day of the interview though, knowing that I would have read up on Myanmar, the panel asked me a question on China instead, which was a lucky break. Apparently, my answer must have satisfied everyone, because I was selected for the post. In a short span of a week, I had gone from being Dir (C&FA–N) to DA (Designate), Myanmar, with the likely deployment date being end-2006. I went home and broke the news to everyone. I called up my father who had been on a diplomatic assignment himself and knew what it meant. My mother was overjoyed that I was going to Brahmadesh, the land of Brahma. I was relieved of my duties in PP Dte and attached to the Foreign Division of the MI Dte. Many other officers at various stages of their pre-dispatch formalities were also attached with the MI (FD), so I could find out from them the SOP to be followed. The first and foremost was to join the Myanmar Language Course at the School of Foreign Languages (SFL) at Lodi Road, New Delhi. Concurrently was the paperwork that had to be processed with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). This involved acceptance of the nomination by the MEA, various security clearances to be done through the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), preparation of diplomatic passports and finally, obtaining approval of the host country called the 'Agreemo', the receipt of which was the trigger for the actual move, buying of

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tickets and intimating the ETA to the incumbent. This whole process takes about a year and that is why the interview had been conducted in end-2006.

The language course at the SFL was a bit of a disappointment. The teaching methodology adopted was more suited to children rather than adults. There was a requirement of learning the alphabet no doubt, but the aim should have been to impart functional proficiency for the job of a DA. Moreover, Myanmar being a tonal language, it was impossible to get the accent right while sitting in India. Besides this, once I returned home after classes, who was I to practise with? Where was the milieu or the stimulus? This was a far cry from how I had learnt French as a child and only strengthened my conviction that a language can best be learnt residing in that country itself. When the time came for the written exam, while we had been taught from a printed text, the question paper was handwritten. It is like learning upper case and being tested in lower case. I was to relieve Col JS Chopra (Artillery) and when he came on leave, he gave a detailed briefing on various functional and administrative aspects, including the schooling system. There was a system of international schools, where the medium of instruction was English but it followed either the British or the US system. University education, though, was entirely in the vernacular. This meant that Isha, who was already pursuing her History (Hons) from Sri Venkateshwara College in New Delhi, would perforce have to stay back. Amala, in the tenth standard, would be halfway through her eleventh by end-2006, so what was to be done? I had my sister's experience at the back of my mind, how her studying in France had charted the course of her career, and thought it would be better if Amala were to move with us. Amala, like Isha, would rather have continued in the same school, but she understood the pros and

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cons and accepted our decision. For some unspecified reasons, the Agreemo kept getting delayed, I have my suspicions of it having been done deliberately, so it was not until June 2007 that we finally moved to Myanmar, more than six months later than planned, by which time Amala had already entered the twelfth grade.

In 2006, the military government in Myanmar abruptly shifted the capital from Yangon to Naypyitaw, a greenfield complex about 300 km to the North of Yangon. The move caught everyone by surprise, as almost overnight, all ministries and their staff were relocated. All the embassies, though, continued to function from Yangon, although a separate diplomatic zone exists in the Naypyitaw master plan. The Indian Embassy at Yangon is located on Merchant Street in downtown Yangon and is housed in what were the offices of the erstwhile Oriental Life Assurance Company, founded in Calcutta in 1818. The embassy moved into the premises in May 1957, where it has continued since then. The ambassador's residence, India House, on Taw Win Road, Dagon Township, housed the chief agent of the Imperial Bank of India until its rebirth as the nationalized State Bank of India in 1954. Most of the officers, including the Defence Attaché, stay in a small walled-off compound that once used to house the officials of the Burmah Shell company.

The Defence Wing was on the first floor of the embassy building. In addition to the DA, the other staff comprised a JCO (Clerk) and a Hav (PA). Col Chopra showed me around the embassy, introducing me to the Ambassador, Shri Bhaskar Mitra; the councillor, Shri Manoj Bharti; and the first secretary, Shri Raj Srivatsav.[1] He also took me to meet various officers of the Myanmar Army (MA). At Yangon, this was Col San Nyunt Oo, the liaison officer of their equivalent of the MI (FD). We then went to Naypyitaw where we called on the top

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brass, Senior General Than Shwe, Vice Senior General Maung Aye, General Thura Shwe Mann and Lt Gen Soe Win, heading the Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs (equivalent to our DGMI).[2] In the evening was a banquet hosted by the OCMSA, attended by all the other country DAs accredited to Myanmar and their wives, to bid farewell to Col JS Chopra and his wife, and to welcome me and my wife. It was a grand affair and gave us a glimpse of what was in store for us.

The job itself was fairly simple in that the Defence Wing had to act as the interface between the Indian Armed Forces—Army, Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard—and the respective Myanmar counterparts through the OCMSA. This included the planning and execution of the various visits, be it delegations headed by senior officers of the three Services, or of ships and aircraft transiting through Myanmar. The DA also had to attend the Indo-Myanmar Border Liaison Meetings (IMBLM) held on the Myanmar–India border alternately, at Tamu in Myanmar and Moreh in Manipur, India. From planning to execution and submitting the paperwork, any visit took about two weeks of effort. With one to two events scheduled per month on average, this meant that the Defence Wing had its hands full. We looked forward to such visits, as each visit further deepened the relations between the armed forces of the two countries. It also gave us an opportunity to get news of what was happening back home. I was often asked then, and even later as Chief post the coup of February 2021, that through our interactions, were we not indirectly supporting a military government? My answer is that you have to differentiate between the armed forces of a country and its ruling dispensation.

As a country that shares land and maritime boundaries with India, the land boundary is 1643 km, and we have to, out of necessity, interact with our military counterparts. There

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are matters that require coordination on day-to-day issues, coordinated patrols on the border by the Army or CORPATs of the Navy, for example. If the two armies or navies do not coordinate, it is the smugglers and other anti-national elements who will have a field day. I am also asked, in most aggrieved tones, as to why Myanmar is siding with China. Well, they are doing it out of compulsion. When nobody else is helping them out and China is offering a carte blanche, what else do you expect? Our foreign policy cannot be based on trying to cling to a moral high horse but on ground realities and national interest. While we shut our doors to Myanmar, China threw theirs wide open. The effect is starkly visible. More than half of the business establishments in Mandalay, the second-largest town after Yangon, are Chinese-owned. The Chinese have their own gated communities, out of bounds for local Myanmar citizens. Going towards the border with China, the situation is even worse, with 75 to 80 per cent of the businesses being Chinese-owned, and the yuan is the currency of choice. All this did not happen overnight but in the two decades or so when the West turned a blind eye, while at the same time supporting military dictatorships in other parts of the world, including Pakistan.

Almost immediately after our arrival was the Monks' Revolution, or the Saffron Revolution as it was dubbed by the Western media with their penchant for giving colour to various revolutions (pun intended). It all started when a group of monks were manhandled by some Army personnel in Mandalay, the temporal seat of Buddhism in Myanmar, in August 2007. This was not taken well and the Buddhist monks started protests, initially in Mandalay itself, and progressing to other population centres, including Yangon. At about the same time, the government removed all fuel subsidies, linking fuel prices to the international market, which caused fuel prices to

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quadruple almost overnight, leading to massive protests against this hike. The two protests thus merged and were dubbed the Saffron Revolution, but to say that the monks were leading the revolution would be incorrect. The flames of these protests, dubbed as pro-democracy protests, were fanned by the West, with a number of 'white-skinned' people easily discernible in the crowds. Initially, the military junta did not do anything but allow the population to vent their feelings. The protests were absolutely peaceful with no arson or looting and no threat to safety, least of all to diplomatic missions. There was one incident of grenade-throwing outside the Chinese embassy, but nothing else. In fact, the processions used to go down Merchant Street and we would watch them go by from the office windows. On one occasion, I even made an approximate head count, which came to not more than a thousand or so, a far cry from the tens of thousands being reported in the Western media. It was only when the ranks of the protestors started getting infiltrated by Western agent provocateurs that the junta cracked down.

In fact, of all the countries, it was the Chinese who were the most worried, because anti-China sentiments run close to the surface, ready to break out. Ambassador Mitra, who had been posted to Myanmar earlier, recollected that he had seen Chinese getting 'slaughtered like rabbits' during some protests that had erupted in his previous tenure. While some embassies did issue travel advisories and such, for India and the Indian embassy, it was business as usual. While the protests were on, the junta had been making notes and taking videos of the protestors, so when they finally did decide to crack down, it did not take them long to round up the ringleaders among the protestors. There were a few incidents of firing, leading to several deaths, including six deaths in one single incident near Sule Pagoda in downtown Yangon, not far from the embassy.

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Vice Senior General Maung Aye went to Mandalay and prostrated himself in front of the Head Abbot, apologizing for the behaviour of the troops and that took the wind out of the sails of the protestors. By the third week of September, normalcy had returned somewhat, the monks' feelings were assuaged and the people had come to terms with the new pricing on fuel. There was one positive fallout as far as we were concerned. Veena had applied to a number of schools, even given some interviews and done some substitution work, but there were no vacancies. Some Westerners were expelled by the junta for participating in the protests, which included a couple of teachers. The schools were in a bind, as the junta was not inclined to give visas to any more Westerners, so Veena was offered a full-time job at the Myanmar International Educational Services School (MIES), Yangon.

Amala, in the meantime, had joined the International School, Yangon (ISY), a private, co-educational day school, for students of all nationalities, based on the US system. The school was founded in 1955 and was widely considered to be the most prestigious secondary school in Myanmar. The school year begins in the second week of August, so we had reached just in time to complete all the admission formalities. Although the school operates as a private school entity in Myanmar, it did so under the umbrella of the American Embassy, receiving some subsidies through the US State Department. Fortunately for Amala, she did not lose a year due to this change of system, though it was touch and go for some time, while the equivalence of credits was worked out. In the US system, there are no streams as such and all students have to do English, maths, a secondary language (French, which Amala had taken in India), any one of the sciences (physics, chemistry or biology), one of the life sciences (economics, history, geography, et al.) and the

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arts (dance, drama, music, painting, etc.), six subjects in all. It made for a well-rounded education, more preferred by US universities but not compatible with our stream system. No matter what combination, the 'best of four criteria' for admission to any stream in Indian universities could not be met. As it so happened, most of Amala's schoolmates were applying to foreign varsities and so did she, also giving her SAT exam and getting a reasonably good score. Based on this, Amala was able to secure admission to the Singapore Management University (SMU) in a four-year Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) programme starting in August 2008. She got her first job immediately after graduating, with Rice Communications, an independent strategic communications consultancy firm, and has been working in Singapore ever since, albeit with different companies. Our decision to take Amala with us to Myanmar paid off in the long run.

A number of countries such as Singapore and Israel did not have any Defence Attaché. The absence of a uniformed person, especially in a country with a military dispensation, left them handicapped. One day the Ambassador of Singapore, Mr Robert Chua, rang me up requesting for a meeting. I was not quite sure of how to respond, so I went to our Ambassador for advice. Ambassador Mitra had no hesitation in giving me the go-ahead. Of course, I should go and meet him he said, and any others too, no issues as far as he was concerned. However, he cautioned that whenever I did go to such meetings, I should put in an obligatory report, informing him of the meeting. This he said, was for my own safety, to rule out any espionage angle. This is something that would never have occurred to me. These requests were usually from countries that did not have a resident DA of their own and hence wanted to know my views on the situation in Myanmar from a military perspective. I met

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the ambassadors of Singapore and Israel several times during my tenure, officially and unofficially. Mr Yaron Mayer became a close acquaintance.[3] This also underscored the importance of having a DA in as many countries as possible.

Cyclone Nargis, a category 3 cyclone, struck Myanmar on 2 and 3 May 2008, making landfall approximately 250 km southwest of Yangon. That a cyclone was building up in the Bay of Bengal was known to all. However, most cyclones veer off towards the North and North East, making landfall either in Bangladesh/West Bengal or on the coast of Orissa. No cyclone had actually hit Myanmar in living memory, some said as much as ninety years, so there was a sense of complacency. Most people shrugged off the warnings; there was no attempt to evacuate the population along the coastline or any advisories to stock up on essentials like water, candles, etc. Even we at the embassy were complacent. Apart from shutting down the embassy a bit earlier and asking everyone to stay home, not much more was done. There were no plans to set up any emergency control room or communications centre, which would have been the SOP in India, particularly in Orissa, where they have perfected the procedures to be followed in case of a cyclone alert. We thought we just had to sit it out for one night, like any other monsoon storm. The Myanmar Navy, which should have known better, did not even bother to move their ships out of the harbour to safer bases further South. In actuality, Cyclone Nargis affected more than fifty townships, including Yangon, the country's largest city. Strong winds and heavy rain caused the greatest damage in the Ayeyarwady Delta, where a storm surge compounded the impact of the cyclone. Nargis was the worst natural disaster in the history of Myanmar.

The cyclone hit us at Yangon in the late evening and wind speeds kept building up. We had our dinner as usual. The

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electricity supply was normal and we went to bed to the sound of the wind whistling past, rattling the doors and windows. Sometime past midnight, there was a loud screeching sound of metal being ripped off. I got out of bed, and by torchlight saw that the entire roof over the front part of our house, the drawing room and two bedrooms, including Amala's, had been torn away by the winds. I got Amala out of bed and into our bedroom, which fortunately still had a roof and we sat all huddled and wound up till daybreak, even as rainwater and debris steadily poured into the house. At daybreak, the winds subsided, the eye of the storm had gone past and we stepped out to the veranda to be met with a scene straight out of a disaster movie. Trees uprooted by the dozen, power lines flailing in the wind, the rain still coming down. Our house had about a foot of water inside by now, damaging all the furniture and fixtures. I surveyed the scene with dismay, wondering where to start and what to do. There was a huge coconut tree blocking the driveway, so I couldn't even take the car out. It wouldn't have mattered though, because all the roads were impassable to traffic. Since we all lived in the same compound, we clambered over and met in the counsellor, Manoj Bharti's residence and exchanged notes. Everyone's houses had been damaged to some extent or the other. One of the other officers had taken the added precaution of moving his car into the garage, but a huge tree had fallen on the garage itself, flattening the garage and the car, which later had to be sold as scrap. With all communications down, there was no way to contact the Ambassador, and more importantly, India, to tell them of our predicament.

The Indian Navy has a well-established SOP for the support of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations, honed through the experience gained in the relief operations undertaken by them in the aftermath

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of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Ever since then, each ship, irrespective of its primary mission, carries a HADR brick comprising essentials such as food, water, blankets and medicines. Seeing the developing situation, Indian naval ships INS *Rana* and *Kirpan* had been pre-positioned at Port Blair. They set sail on 5 May, reaching Yangon on 7 May, the first international assistance to reach Yangon. To do so, they had to navigate the tidal channel up to Yangon, which was littered with the wrecks of ships that had either capsized or sunk at their moorings. On reaching, not only did they discharge their cargo but also conducted a medical camp at a nearby local ground. Their conduct was the epitome of professionalism. The Defence Wing had to coordinate all these efforts even without a roof over our own heads, and with no water or electricity. In the midst of all this, Ambassador Bhaskar Mitra had a brilliant idea of taking diesel from the Indian ships. We rounded up all the empty barrels that we could find using our local contacts, hired a pick-up truck and got about a dozen 200-litre barrels of diesel topped up. With this, we were able to run our generators and restore power to the embassy. The military junta, though, refused permission for the American warship USS *Essex* and a host of other warships, as well as ships of international aid agencies to enter their international waters. These ships had to offload their cargo into smaller local vessels. This only demonstrated the goodwill that India had generated through its sustained engagement with Myanmar.

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International aid continued to pour in by land, sea and air. Several IAF aircraft, AN-32s and Il-76s, landed at Yangon carrying relief stores. India also sent a field hospital, which did yeoman service in some of the worst affected parts of the Ayeyarwady Delta. I was a bit disappointed with the Air Force, though. The pilots of one of the early sorties, after parking the

aircraft on the tarmac, came up to me and wanted directions to the duty-free shop. I was absolutely flabbergasted. Hadn't they seen from the air how devastated the countryside was? The buzz on the airfield of dozens of aircraft from different countries offloading their humanitarian cargo? Was this some jaunt to do some shopping and carry back duty-free liquor? I left them to their own devices.

During the time I was in Myanmar, discussions on the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Project (KMMTP) were ongoing. Initially, India had tried to persuade Bangladesh to offer transport and transit rights through the Chittagong port, which is less than 200 km away from Agartala, the capital of Tripura. However, the then dispensation in Bangladesh was not favourably inclined towards India and steadfastly refused to even consider the proposal, which would have been beneficial to both countries. The Kaladan project envisaged connecting Kolkata port with Myanmar's Sittwe Port by sea, then from Sittwe to Paletwa via the Kaladan River through barges, and lastly from Paletwa to Lawngtlai, Mizoram by road. Compared to the 1880 km-long route through the congested and vulnerable Siliguri Corridor, the Kaladan project would halve the distance to a mere 950 km. The Indian and Myanmar governments signed the Kaladan multimodal project agreement in 2008, and work on the project commenced in 2010, with a deadline of 2014. However, the project has been plagued by setbacks on account of faulty planning and coordination issues. The project budget was proposed to be Rs 536 crore in 2008 but is now estimated to be more than Rs 3200 crore, owing to the delays and inclusion of additional works overlooked earlier. The work also suffered due to the intimidation and attacks on the project by active Myanmar insurgent groups, the Arakan Army (AA) and the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, variously funded

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by China and Pakistan. The AA was brought to the table as part of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement negotiated by the Myanmar government but that also collapsed post the coup of February 2021. The revised deadline set as 2021 had to be further revised to 2023. The manner in which the project was executed, including the bureaucratic and contractual delays on our side, with time and cost overruns did not compare favourably with China.

Something similar happened to another request made by Myanmar through Army channels. We had been continuously requesting the MA to take action against various Indian insurgent groups sheltering in Myanmar, opposite our states of Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. The MA said that they were trying their best but were hampered by the lack of proper roads in the area. Accordingly, they made a plan to develop five roads leading into the interiors, which would facilitate their movement and ability to launch operations. For each of the roads, they had proposed a set of plant equipment, with one 'set' to be deployed for the construction of each road. One such set as projected by them comprised two dozers, a motor grader, two compactors and five tipper trucks, about ten pieces of equipment per set. The MA had identified five roads to start with, so that meant a total of fifty vehicles in all. This request was made in late 2008, with a similar request to China for their border to the East. The proposal, after due deliberations at the embassy, was submitted through both the MEA and Defence Wing channels.

In early January 2009, we lost my father-in-law to lung cancer, although he had never smoked a single cigarette in his entire life. The Vice-President, Shri Mohammad Ansari, was scheduled to visit when Uma rang up to say that things were serious. Veena immediately left for India via Bangkok and I was

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to follow as soon as the visit got over, which was commencing the very next day. We got the news of his passing while Veena was still at Bangkok, and while I was waiting on the tarmac at Naypyitaw to receive the VP and his entourage. It was a big blow to us. He had always been there, especially when I was away on my numerous field postings, and the girls loved playing with him.

In mid-2009, I had gone to the harbour to receive two of our Indian Navy ships that had come for a port call. Lined up on the jetty leading to where our ships were berthed were lines and lines of tipper trucks and dozers that China had provided in response to the MA's request. When I returned to the embassy, I immediately called the MIFD to check on the status of our proposal. As expected, the proposal had got caught up in red tape. Who would fund the project; MEA, since it was in a foreign country or MoD, since the request had come through defence channels? The civil firms who had to produce the equipment would not start the production until a firm order was placed with them, which was fair enough. In order to place an order though, a government sanction letter (GSL) was required, which was not forthcoming as the source of funding was undecided. Even if the GSL were to be given the very same day, the civil firms had a lead time of eighteen to twenty-four months, since they had other orders to fulfil. At this rate, nothing would materialize until end-2010 or mid-2011, by which time I would have returned to India. This was just not acceptable to me.

I kept monitoring the case but by early 2010, it was nowhere near the GSL stage. In March of that year, I went on leave and met everyone handling the case in both the MEA and MoD. Gen Deepak Kapoor was the COAS then, and he had visited Myanmar in 2009 on an official visit. During the visit,

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many issues were discussed, including the supply of this non-lethal hardware, which he had assured would materialize soon. I sought a meeting and went and met the COAS, explaining the situation and making an impassioned plea for something, anything to be given. I told him it would be a great blow to our reputation if something he had promised were not to materialize before he retired later that month. Besides, I added, my tenure was ending in June 2010, and I would like to leave on a high. I don't know what strings he pulled, but the file suddenly started moving. Gen VK Singh who took over from him as the COAS, and who had also visited Myanmar in his capacity of Army Commander, Eastern Command, followed up on it. Out of the entire MA projection, two dozers were finally made available, which were ceremonially handed over at the Tamu–Moreh border in June 2010, just before my return. That was the India story—tall on promises, short on delivery.

When I had deployed to Myanmar in 2007, the selection board for my batch from Colonel to Brigadier had already been held, the results of which were declared in November of that year. My batchmates had started picking up their Brigadier rank from January 2008 and had already finished commanding their Brigades. I was thus about two and a half years behind and had to wait to return to India to pick up my rank, as promotions while abroad were not permitted. Since I was in Delhi to follow up on the dozer case, I went to meet the Colonel of the Regiment, Lt Gen Bikram Singh, who was then the DGSD, but slated to go to Eastern Command once Gen VK Singh became the Chief. I told him that I was due for promotion to the rank of Brigadier and sought his advice on where to go for my Brigade command. Though he did not immediately indicate anything, he said he would look into it and I knew that he would do what was best.

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I returned to Myanmar and after the brief face-saving excitement of handing over the dozers, two of which finally materialized, I started preparing to bring the curtain down on the Eastern sojourn.

Kye Zu Tin Bar Dae.[4]

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Part 3

Flag Ranks

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3.1

Back to Soldiering: The First Star

After dispatching our luggage by container ship, we shifted to a hotel for the last few days, having handed over charge to Col Rajesh Kumar of the Rajput Regiment. We handed over the house, bid farewell to the staff and moved out. Dates for the general elections, the first in more than two decades, had been announced for November 2010, and there was a suppressed sense of both excitement and trepidation in the air. I too had my farewell round of parties and call-ons. By now, the new National Parliament building at Naypyitaw, the Pyidangsu Hlutaw, which had been under construction, had been inaugurated. It was an imposing structure meant to overawe visitors. My last call was on Vice Senior General Maung Aye, in the main reception hall. It was a huge room with flags on either side. In the middle of the hall, two chairs had been placed, with the national flags of both countries on a small table placed in between. Nothing else. I walked into this huge, cavernous hall with my boots clicking on the polished marble floor and saluted the Vice Senior General, who was already present in the room. We chatted for a few minutes one-on-one, and the Vice Senior

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General was full of appreciation for all that India had done in support of Myanmar. I sensed, yet again, that Myanmar wanted much more from India; that they wanted to break free from the shackles that bound them to China. However, before doing so, they had to be certain that India would stick by them through thick and thin, as had China, who had even used their veto power to scuttle an anti-Myanmar resolution in the UN Security Council.

That was all in the past and it was now time to get back to serious soldiering. While I was away on this diplomatic assignment, the case for the raising of two additional Divisions had been approved and the GSL issued. Accordingly, two new Divisions, 56 Infantry Division and 72 Infantry Division, were to be raised, commencing from 2009. The raising plan had been carefully and practically worked out. First, one Brigade of the new Division would be raised under the wings of an existing Division, which would give them the requisite administrative support. The following year, the Divisional HQ and the HQ units, viz. engineers, signals, medical, etc., and the second Brigade would be raised. For this, the first Brigade, now fully operational, would be the foundation. In the third year, the last Brigade would get raised, following which the entire Division would become ready for operations. 46 Infantry Brigade was the first Brigade to be raised for 71 Infantry Division, under the watchful eye of HQ 5 Mountain Division at Tenga.

I was still in Myanmar when I received my promotion-cum-posting order to take over command of 106 Infantry Brigade, but it did not ring a bell. When I asked my two Army colleagues in the Defence Wing, they too did not know of it. I rang up MI (FD) and again drew a blank, except that the nearest railway station (NRS) was Guwahati. I was one step closer to solving the mystery. That meant I would be moving Eastwards again.

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But where to go after reaching Guwahati? Was it a family or non-family station? All these questions had a bearing on where to consign the luggage container. Thankfully, we did not have the children's schooling to worry about any more. Slowly, more information trickled in. 106 Infantry Brigade was a new raising, with the raising date of 1 July 2010. It was to be raised at Phulbari, Assam, an erstwhile Army location and would be the second Brigade of 71 Infantry Division, which itself would also be raised on 1 July at Misamari, Assam, under 4 Corps, with Maj Gen Raman Dhawan as the raising GOC. It was indeed ironic that I would be raising a Brigade of the very Divisions which, as a Director in the PP Dte, I had advocated against. *C'est la vie*.

Phulbari would be a field posting, so we decided that Veena should take up residence in Delhi, which would also be good for Isha, who had been more or less alone these past three years. In Delhi, I went to the Station HQ and put in my application for SF accommodation, for which there was a long waiting list. However, since we were returning from a foreign posting, we had priority in the allotment of accommodation. Our luggage hadn't reached yet, so I left Veena with our family friend Urmila Bendre, with whom Isha had been staying in our absence. Soon after my departure, we were allotted a house in Cariappa Vihar in Delhi Cantonment. Veena and Isha shifted there and settled in, buying all the essentials, including a fridge, washing machine and TV, as we had disposed of all these items while moving to Myanmar. The container also came in my absence, and Veena had a trying time to get it released from the container terminal at Tughlakabad. The container terminal had hundreds of containers lying around with no semblance of order and even locating the correct container was problematic. Getting the Customs clearance was even more problematic, with the staff

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there considering it below their dignity to deal with a woman. It was only when they realized that Veena was not going to back down, did they grudgingly sign off on the forms. Then, of course, hiring a truck to load the container on, moving it to Cariappa Vihar, unloading and lugging all the cartons all the way to the third floor. It was a difficult job, that too in the hot and humid summer months, but in no time, our new home was ready. Isha was, of course, a great help as also her friend Simon, who was her colleague in the same dance company, Danceworx, where Isha was working, Amala still being away in Singapore.

By then, I had left to take up my new assignment. I reported at Guwahati, where an NCO from 'my' Brigade had come to receive me. Since it was already late evening, we stayed in a nearby guest room, it being unsafe to drive at night in an insurgency-prone area; the ULFA and other splinter groups still being active. The next morning, I wore my uniform with my Brigadier badges of rank and the gorget patches with one star on the collar of my shirt. No fanfare, no one even to witness this 'promotion', which I had waited two and a half years for. We then drove in convoy to Phulbari, with a protection vehicle to the front and rear. It was as if I had never been away. En route, we halted at the transit camp at Kharupetia, famous for its dosas and coffee.

Just as it had been done for the Division, the raising of the Brigade had also been well thought through. For each Division, the commensurate number of Battalions had also to be raised. On raising, these new Battalions were sent to old, well-established Brigades in peace stations, where the new Battalions could settle in. From these Brigades, the older Battalions, as part of the normal turnover, would be sent to the new raising Brigade in the field. For 106 Infantry Brigade, two Battalions had been allotted, namely 10 MADRAS and 7 BIHAR. The third Battalion was to come later.

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Phulbari lies in the Sonitpur district of Assam, North of the Brahmaputra River. There used to be a military garrison here as part of 5 Mountain Division. After the Sumdorung Chu incident in 1987, units of 5 Mountain Division had been moved forward to the Tawang sector of Arunachal Pradesh as part of Op Chequerboard that followed and remained deployed there. As a result, the garrison had remained unoccupied, except for a Platoon left behind for security duties. Over these two decades in the damp and humid weather, all the buildings had disintegrated and trees were growing inside the barracks, with their tops jutting out through the roofs. The jungle had reclaimed its space. At first glance, it looked exactly like Angkor Vat, only worse. 10 MADRAS along with the HQ of 106 Inf Bde was to be located here. About 10 km to the West was the garrison of Thakurbari—HQ 77 Mountain Brigade along with its Battalions, who were deployed in CI/CT operations in upper Assam. Space had been made in this garrison for 7 BIHAR. Since this garrison was a functional one, it was pretty much comfortable, with all the basic amenities. Approximately midway was Amrabari, where the third Battalion was to be located, along with some of the Brigade HQ elements, which could not be accommodated within Phulbari. This location had been fully reclaimed by the jungle and from the track connecting these locations, even a single barrack was not to be seen. Moreover, over the years, the villagers had made off with whatever they could lay their hands on: doors, windows, electrical fittings, roofing sheets, even the switchboards and fuses. What was left was just an empty shell reeking of decay and despondency.

But that's the hand we had been dealt with and we had to make the most of it. We, the team comprising Col Makol, the Dy Cdr; Lt Col Sameer Sharma, Bde GSO 1 (Ops); Lt

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Col Hemant, AQMG; and Maj Sameer, AAG, got right down to it. The first task was to apportion whatever buildings there were at Phulbari between the HQ and the Battalion, making sure that both got a mix of good and bad buildings. The CO of 10 MADRAS, Col R Mutalik was most cooperative and even offered to move out of his hut (residence would be too grand a word) to make way for me. The HQ was totally dependent on 10 MADRAS for food, water, clothing and shelter, since we did not have anything of our own. Our men dined in their *langar*, JCOs in their JCOs' Mess and officers in their Officers' Mess. Over the course of the next months, the complete set of stores as per the War Establishment Tables kept pouring in, and we were able to slowly and steadily wean ourselves away from 10 MADRAS. 7 BIHAR, commanded by Col Negi, chipped in too, by giving us on loan whatever they could spare; tables, chairs, furnishings, crockery and cutlery—our wish list was bottomless. The men of the Brigade, the Brigade Camp, were from the Bihar Regiment. The Brigade Subedar Major (SM) had come on promotion from 16 BIHAR, which was at Leh. That summer, there was a freak cloudburst at Leh, which triggered a massive mudslide that swept half of 16 BIHAR away. The CO of the unit wrote to all the Bihar units and HQ requesting financial assistance. What could we give? We were ourselves a new raising with not a penny to our name. Providentially, the Corps HQ sent us a cheque of Rs 10,000 for our welfare fund. We encashed this cheque in our newly opened account and made out a fresh one in favour of 16 BIHAR. Their need was greater than ours.

Being a new raising did not mean that we did not have an operational role, which is our bread and butter. There was so much to be done and hardly enough hours in the day to do it all. We decided to make two teams; an operations team with me

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and the G-1 and an administrative team with the Dy and AAG, to look after the operational and administrative aspects of the raising, respectively, with the AQ as the fulcrum. Of course, the overall responsibility would remain mine, but it would free me from mundane housekeeping chores and decisions. Once the overall strategy had been discussed and formalized, then it was just a matter of coordination. I could then spend as much time in the forward area to bring the Brigade up to speed.

The operational area assigned to the Brigade was in the HAA of the Tawang sector, which had six sub-sectors. Prior to the raising of 71 Infantry Division, the entire sector was looked after by 5 Mountain Division alone. The other Division of the Corps, 21 Mountain Division, was the reserve. The drawback of the earlier deployment was that 5 Mountain Division did not have any reserves of its own and therefore, 21 Mountain Division would get committed early on. Therefore, the requirement of another Division, each with its own reserves. The Tawang sector was thus divided between the two Divisions, with the three Western sub-sectors remaining with 5 Mountain Division, and the three Eastern sub-sectors going to 71 Infantry Division. In this arrangement, 106 Infantry Brigade was given the responsibility of defending the Landa Ridge sub-sector, adjoining 5 Mountain Division, with its Battalions echeloned one behind the other. There was one Battalion right up front at Pt 4720, Landa North, another midway through the ridge, Landa Centre, and the third (as yet notional) Battalion further down the ridge at C III, or Landa South, along with the Brigade HQ. The HQ of the second Brigade was also on the same ridge, sandwiched between Landa North and South, with the tactical HQ of the Division at the base of the ridge at C I. The third and Eastern-most sub-sector was an ad hoc sub-sector looked after by the Dy Cdr of one of the Brigades,

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with an ad hoc staff. This had also been the arrangement earlier, under 5 Mountain Division. This arrangement always surprised me as to why we still had to resort to an ad hoc sector even after the raising of a full-fledged Division. Equally surprising was the fact that there were three HQs along one ridge line, which was a bit of an overkill. Our Battalions being in the second and third tier of defences meant we also had reinforcement and counter-attack tasks, within the Divisional AOR as well as the AOR of 5 Mountain Division.

This was a lot to digest in one go, so we concentrated on our primary tasks first. Being in an HAA, even the reconnaissance had to be planned keeping acclimatization in mind, falling back to rest for the night at lower altitudes. During the first few weeks, especially before I had a chance to visit the forward areas, I had to rely almost solely on my memory of the field trip undertaken as a student in the HC course. Each field trip is followed by a war game specific to that command. For the Eastern Command war game, I had been made one of the enemy commanders, i.e. the PLA commander, so I had to think and plan like them. As a result, I was quite familiar with the names of various places on the Chinese as well as on our own side. I think that was the best part of the HC course, as it gave exposure to all the nooks and corners of the country. These field trips served me well in future tenures too.

Since we were a new raising, we had to make our own, new plans, right from mobilization onwards. Some of these plans were available to the older Divisions and Brigades, but they were hesitant to part with them, especially 5 Mountain Division, who felt that we had encroached on their turf. For 21 Mountain Division, CI/CT operations were the higher priority and conventional operations, which should actually have been the main priority, were relegated to a secondary role.

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As a result, their folders pertaining to conventional operations were rudimentary and outdated. In a way though, this was good as it forced us to do everything a priori for ourselves. We carried out our own analysis of the terrain and the deductions thereof, often coming up with new perspectives that had not been thought of earlier. We did not get templated by 'what is' but rather thought more along the lines of 'what should be'. Once again, this was not liked by the older formations as they thought we were trying to be extra smart and trying to show them in poor light. One of our recommendations was that 106 Inf Bde could take on the AOR hitherto assigned due to a lack of troops to an ad hoc brigade and do away with this ad hocism. This recommendation was not accepted then, but this change has been effected now. At the time of raising, the Corps Commander of 4 Corps was Lt Gen Gyan Bhushan, who was replaced by Lt Gen Shakti Gurung. (Maj) Gyan Bhushan had been the BM of 191 Infantry Brigade when we had been part of the same formation way back in 1983–86. He had seen me as a young Captain, always at the forefront of all activities. (Col) Shakti Gurung had himself been the DA, Myanmar, so we had that in common. Both were absolutely clear-headed when it came to operations and would not compromise operational effectiveness at the altar of turf battles. When the question of reorientation of the AOR of the Divisions came up, I was nominated to write a military paper analysing the pros and cons and to make recommendations. I was in a quandary, but I need not have worried. The Corps Commander called me and in private told me exactly how to word the paper and what should be the final recommendations. Write five points in favour of 5 Mountain Division and seven points in favour of 71 Infantry Division he said, and leave the rest to me. And that's how 71 Infantry Division got its own AOR, both in war and

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in peacetime for Border Management Posture (BMP) duties, which had earlier been the exclusive preserve of 5 Mtn Div.[1]

Veena and Isha also came to Phulbari whenever possible. On one such visit, I was sitting at home, my *kutir*, doing some calculations involving mule loads. Anyone who has remotely been near mules would know how vexing these problems are. Domestic load and useful load, turnaround distances, speeds uphill and downhill. No matter how hard one tried, the figures would never tally. While I was doing this, Isha, who was reading something, was chuckling away in a corner. When I asked her, she said she was reading a book about the British in Afghanistan and the problems they had with recalcitrant mules. I asked for the book and checked what period it pertained to and discerned that it was of the period between 1839 and 1842. When I told her I was solving mule-related problems, she could not believe her ears, giving me a hearty laugh and a disbelieving look. That set me thinking that we don't seem to have changed much in more than 150 years. Surely there was a better way of doing things?

Slowly and steadily, things started taking shape. The administrative team under Col Makol had done a terrific job of collecting all the controlled stores and equipment from depots all over the country. We soon realized that the difficult part of the raising was not of the HQ itself, but of all the other institutions that go to make up an organization. The unit-run canteen (URC) is a case in point. Not only did we have to apply to open a URC but also secure a loan as the starting capital. A building had to be identified and civil works carried out to make it functional. Racks and counters had to be procured for displaying the goods. So many things that we had taken for granted, not knowing how the back-end really functions or the effort that it had taken to reach that stage. There was a small

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sentry box just outside the main gate, which we did up and got the SBI to install an ATM there. Not as easy as it sounds, as for the ATM to function, it has to be connected to the network. So first, we had to find a solution to have foolproof network connectivity, which was achieved by engineering a circuit through the Wireless in Local Loop (WLL), as BSNL did not have the wherewithal, nor were they inclined to extend a line to the middle of nowhere.

All the Brigade locations, Phulbari, Thakurbari, Amrabari, were in the middle of the tea gardens. The Phulbari Tea Estate actually surrounded our garrison on all sides. This estate was part of the range of tea estates owned by the McLeod Russel India Ltd (MRIL) group of tea producers. McLeod Russel began planting tea in India in 1869 and today is the largest tea-producing company in the world. They were our neighbours, so to speak, and we soon made friends with the planters. Most of the tea gardens had been established by former Army officers and they had replicated the ethos and work culture of the armed forces, so it was but natural that we got along. Mr Ravinder Singh Manhas of the Phulbari estate, my closest neighbour, was the son of an Army officer of the Sikh Regiment. His wife, Raman, was senior coordinator at the Assam Valley Public School, one of the most prestigious schools in Assam. Ravinder invited us to the estate and explained the whole process that goes into making your morning cup of tea. Right from the plucking to the sorting and airing of the leaves, the intricacies of temperature and humidity, what is meant by the term 'first flush' and a tour of the factory itself, where the aroma of tea permeated the air. We saw the cut, tear, curl (CTC) method of processing black tea, in which the leaves are processed into small, hard pellets, unlike the orthodox tea, in which the leaves are rolled

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into strips. After a few visits to the garden, I became quite an expert myself and could have easily passed off as a planter.

The first year passed by in a flash. The Divisional HQ celebrated its first Raising Day on 1 July 2011. Although we too were raised on the same date, we thought that rather than celebrating the raising day, we would celebrate the completion of raising, the day we became operationally effective, which was 1 October. By then, we had managed to make an Officers' Mess by putting together some re-appropriated shelters, so we could host the GOC, Maj Gen Raman Dhawan and a few planters for lunch. Col Makol was posted out a month or so later, to take over a Brigade in Northern Command. Col Makol was willing to wait for a couple of months more to take over 106 Infantry Brigade itself on my getting posted out and we even took up a case to that effect but it was turned down. We dined out Col Makol and dined in Col Bharat Singh Shekhawat, who was also approved for Brigadier. I thought he was being placed in anticipation of taking over from me. I too got my posting shortly thereafter to the Higher Command Wing of the Army War College, Mhow, and was replaced by Brig Lama. Col Bharat, therefore, would not be staying long in the Brigade, so it was difficult to fathom with what logic these postings were being planned. It was a wonderful, eye-opening experience to raise a new outfit and to know that your name would always be the topmost on the leaderboard.

Veena and Isha continued to stay in the SF at Delhi Cantonment, with Simon a regular visitor. After completing college, Isha wanted to pursue a career in dance through the Danceworx company, which she joined as a trainee dancer. At that time, the company was auditioning for a dance show to be held in the Kingdom of Dreams at Gurgaon. For the auditions and the practices thereafter, Isha would drive to Gurgaon,

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practice for the day and then drive back. This was an exhausting routine and Isha became stick-thin. We consulted the specialist at the Base Hospital, Delhi Cantonment, who advised us to put her on a high-protein diet. Meanwhile, Veena, who had remained in touch with her colleagues in Myanmar, got a mail from her ex-principal, Mr David Shaefer, in early 2011. Due to some differences between the board members, the MIES where Veena had taught had split into two, with Mr Shaefer becoming the principal of one of the entities, the Myanmar International School, Yangon (MISY). He asked Veena if she would be willing to join him in his new venture as one of the expatriate teachers, with more or less the same terms and conditions as earlier, beginning with the autumn term. I was away in the field, Isha was busy the whole day, and the house was up and running. After some discussion, Veena took up the offer and left for Yangon in August 2011.

I joined the faculty of the AWC in mid-January 2012, for the tail-end of the HC-40 course, replacing my batchmate Brig VP Singh of the Jat Regiment. When I joined, the course was away on one of its tours, so I got some time to settle down. It is one thing to be a student attending the HC course, and quite another to be an instructor for the same course. At the time, the Commandant of the AWC was Lt Gen Anil Chait (Armoured), who had been my boss in the PP Dte, followed by Lt Gen Kamath (Madras Regiment). Maj Gen Bhalla (Jat) was the commander of the HC Wing. The other directing staff (DS) were drawn so as to have representation of all arms. I was the Infantry DS, Brig Vikram Dogra (of Ironman fame) the armour DS, Brig Moni Chandi from the engineers, Brig Ahluwalia from the Mechanized Infantry and Air Cmde Arun from the Air Force, to give it the tri-service touch. I moved into a two-room set not far from the rooms I had occupied as

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a student. Since Mhow was a peace station, I would have to vacate the SF in Delhi and accordingly, I applied for a house at Mhow. Here too, there was a waiting list and I would get a house only by June that year, into which I shifted during the break between the two courses, HC 41 beginning only in July 2012. During the break, we also went to Singapore for Amala's graduation. The event, held at the SMU, was called the 'Commencement Ceremony', as graduation was not the end, but only the beginning of a long journey. On reflection, this was true even for us, where the passing-out parade and going over the 'Antim Pag' were just the beginning of our careers.

At the HC Wing, the first task at hand was to correct all the dissertations that the student officers had submitted. There were close to a hundred students, so each DS got about twenty dissertations each. These had to be assessed in a timebound manner not only since the course terminated in March, but since this was also a mandatory requirement for the grant of an MPhil degree by the Devi Ahilyabai Vishwa Vidyalaya, Indore, to which the AWC was affiliated. There were also awards for the three best dissertations, so we had to do justice to the assessments. My own thesis as a student officer on 'The Psychology of Terrorism', had been long-listed and then short-listed for these awards, so I knew its worth. The next was the conduct of the JOCAP, the Joint Capsule, wherein the students of the Navy and Air War Colleges also come to Mhow for a series of tri-service events, including talks by all the Service Chiefs, culminating in a tri-service war game, the grand finale. The course ends shortly thereafter in April. The months of May and June are spent on various administrative activities, as well as honing the training programme for the next course, including identifying the possible guest speakers who could address the next course. It is quite a well-oiled system.

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One of the main tasks of the DS was to organize the forward area tours and then conduct the war game specific to that command. Since I had come from Eastern Command, that responsibility was given to me. Of all the tours, I would rate the Eastern Command tour as the most complicated. The tour has to cover visits to the Command HQ at Kolkata, the Corps HQ at Sukna (West Bengal), Tezpur (Assam) and Dimapur (Nagaland), as well as the Eastern Air Command and Director General Assam Rifles (DGAR) at Shillong (Meghalaya). The Divisions and Brigades to be visited were in the states of Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Manipur. Given the poor air and road connectivity of the North East, organizing this tour was a logistician's nightmare. Conducting the Northern Command tour restricted to J & K was child's play in comparison. I benefited immensely from these tours, especially during my Brigade Command. I was surprised, therefore, to see that in the post-tour feedback, a number of students had written that the tour was a waste of time with little training value. I had to get the course together and share with them my experience and how such ill-considered feedback, just because they were 'soft' and couldn't handle the rigours of travelling, was not done, as it could jeopardize future tours. I gave them my own example and how much I had benefited from them. I think my point was well-taken because, after that, the feedback was more on professional and less on administrative matters.

After completing command of a Brigade, officers are selected to attend the National Defence College course at New Delhi. This is a very prestigious tri-service course, also attended by officers of the other Group A services. The nomination for the course happens in October during the Army Commanders' Conference for the course beginning on the first Monday of January of the following year. The SB 1, the promotion board

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for Brigadier to Major General also happens during the Army Commanders' Conference and our SB had already been held earlier that year, in the April conference. The result of the promotion board was declared in early October, in which I was cleared for promotion to Major General in both the Command and Staff streams. Since the NDC course is meant only for Brigadiers, my name was deleted from the agenda and I never got the benefit of attending the NDC. I am thus probably the first non-NDC Chief. I was told that I would be side-stepped within the AWC or within Mhow to pick up my rank but that did not materialize. Instead, I was posted in mid-December, as the Chief of Staff to 33 Corps at Sukna, which looks after Sikkim. I thus stayed in Mhow for only eleven months and had to leave HC 41 midway. One way to look at it was that I had 'done' one full course, the last four months of HC 40 and the first six months of HC 41. Time to pack again!

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3.2

Eastwards Again: Change of Uniform and Role

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In November, during a brief layover in Delhi during one of the tours, I had gone to the MS Branch to inquire about my next posting since I had been approved for Maj Gen. Nothing had been decided yet, I was told. Moreover, since I was about halfway down the seniority list, my turn would probably take some time coming. I said I was fine with that. Since Veena, who was working abroad, was coming over for the winter break over Christmas and the New Year, my only request was that my posting should only be done in the new year. I felt this was a very unique and doable request. Which sane person asks for his promotion to be deferred? Within the next week itself, however, my orders came to report to my new assignment as Chief of Staff (COS), 33 Corps by 28 December 2012. Bummer.

Apparently, for some archaic reason, the entire June 80 batch of officers who had been approved had to pick up the rank latest by 31 December, if we were to remain eligible for the next increment due on 1 July of the following year. It seems

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someone in MS Branch was on the ball after all. As a result, we spent the whole of Veena's holidays packing and moving to Sukna, with a short detour to Pune to meet our friends and relatives. Both of us were upset because we had planned to do a lot of things together during this break. Veena had only joined me for brief stays during my various sojourns at Mhow and during the HC course, so we really hadn't explored Mhow and its surroundings, except for a visit to Mandu once. Shortly after reaching Sukna, Veena had to return, so we could not go around much, though we did manage a trip to Gangtok, where Devraj Anbu was commanding 17 Mtn Div, and to Kalimpong, where Abhay Krishna was commanding 27 Mtn Div, as part of my familiarization visit. All three of us were coursemates and we all later became Army Commanders. It would have been nostalgic to visit Darjeeling where we had spent those idyllic two months in 1986, but we could not organize that.

When I reported to the Corps, it was being commanded by Lt Gen Surendernath, 'Suri' to his friends, who left just a little bit later, to be replaced by Lt Gen KJ Singh, both of whom were from the Armoured Corps. For some reason, a large number of the 33 Corps Commanders were from the Armoured Corps, and I wondered why. This posting of mine to 33 Corps on the staff was only a stopgap arrangement before I was placed in command of a Division. Because of my Myanmar connection, my name had been put on a panel for posting as the Inspector General Assam Rifles (IGAR) (South) which looks after Manipur and also conducts the Indo-Myanmar Border Liaison Meetings (IMBLMs), which I used to attend from the Myanmar side. At the same time, the name of Maj Gen Rajeev Chopra was sent for IGAR (North), which looked after Nagaland. The stay at Sukna was only supposed

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to be for six weeks, but it got extended to nearly six months, due to clearances not forthcoming from the MHA, under whom the Assam Rifles function for administrative purposes. When the orders did come, the names and locations had been interchanged. I was to go as the IGAR (N) and Rajeev as the IGAR (S), with both of us to assume our appointments in July 2013.

Since Lt Gen KJ Singh had just taken over, he was out on reconnaissance whenever the weather permitted. He would be out two to three times a week, leaving early in the morning and coming back by noon, as flying in the valleys of Sikkim was restricted to the morning hours due to meteorological reasons. On return, he would call for a staff conference and pass a flurry of orders, before departing for the day. As the COS, it then became my responsibility to follow through on these orders and make sure they were implemented. Lt Gen KJ Singh was a hard taskmaster who wanted results and who did not really care much for, or get bogged down by, paperwork or procedures. If he wanted something done, it had to be done and it was our job as the staff to find a way. Initially, he thought that I would just be 'marking-time' at Sukna, waiting for my posting, but soon realized that I was getting the job done and we developed a close understanding and rapport. So much so that towards the end of my tenure, I could even tell him upfront to stop giving us new tasks at such a frenetic pace, as the documentation and accounting were suffering and we might end up with some serious audit objections. He was very fond of making things: a sentry post here, a decorative entrance gate there, so we used to jokingly refer to ourselves as the 'KJ Construction Company'.[1]

A little over five months after reporting to Sukna, it was time to move again. Nagaland was once again a field posting,

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so I applied for and got SF accommodation at Pratap Chowk in Delhi Cantt, as Isha needed a place to stay. During the year that I was at Mhow, Isha had applied for a course in the Trinity Laban Repertoire of Music and Dance and she had just returned from London, after spending a year there. Isha and Simon were going steady by now, and Simon had even visited us at Mhow, and the year spent apart had not diminished their friendship. Simon had by now joined the Pathways World School, Gurugram, as a dance teacher. With both Veena and I away, it was reassuring to know that there was somebody whom Isha could call on in case of emergencies. With the home front secure, I flew off to Dimapur.

At Dimapur, I was received by Col Manuhar Sharma, the Col GS, who also happened to be from the same Regiment. We drove from Dimapur to Kohima with Manuhar briefing me along the way. The Assam Rifles (AR) is a paramilitary force that comes under the MHA. Quite like the SFF, the AR too is officered by the Army and functions under its operational control, in this case under the 3 Corps located at Dimapur. The DGAR, which has its HQ in Shillong, looks after all the administrative aspects, namely the 'raise, train, sustain' functions. Under the operational control of 3 Corps were the three IGARs, North at Kohima, Nagaland; South at Imphal, Manipur; and East at Silchar, Assam. Coincidently, all three IGs—Satish Dua, myself and Rajeev Chopra—were from Lima Squadron, from three consecutive courses, 55th, 56th and 57th respectively.

Nagaland, which attained statehood in 1963, is known as the birthplace of insurgency in India and is also the longest-running insurgency. Following the Shillong Accord

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of 1975, matters appeared to have been resolved, but some of the Nagas saw this as a betrayal of their core demands and formed the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in 1980, continuing the armed insurrection against India. The NSCN had undergone many splits over the years over ideological and personal reasons and there were now as many as eight different groups operating in Nagaland, the main ones being the NSCN (IM), NSCN (KK) and NSCN (K). However, a ceasefire was in place with all the insurgent groups since 1997, so there was relative peace and quiet in Nagaland. That had not always been the case and the 1980s had seen some of the deadliest ambushes and casualties suffered by the Army.

IGAR (N) with its HQ at Kohima, had three Sectors (Brigade equivalent) under it: HQ 7 Sector was at Tuensang, HQ 5 Sector at Chieswema and HQ 7 Sector at Dimapur only a little distance away from HQ 3 Corps, which was at the Rangapahar Military Station. Between them, they had eleven AR Battalions looking after the (then) eleven districts of Nagaland. The tasks of the Battalions were fairly simple in that they were to enforce the ceasefire ground rules, keep the rival factions at bay and ensure that there was no forcible recruitment or extortion in the name of 'taxation'. The Battalions deployed in the border districts of Mon, Tuensang, Kiphire and Phek additionally had a border guarding and management role along the Indo-Myanmar border, akin to what the BSF does along the Indo-Pak or Indo-Bangladesh border. Since then, a number of new districts have been created, and now, Nagaland has a total of sixteen districts, largely configured on tribal lines.

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It was a lot to assimilate as it was my first posting to Nagaland, my only prior knowledge being from the visit to Nagaland as a student of the HC course and then as the DS. But on both occasions, the briefing of the 3 Corps had been more focused on conventional operations, since there was a war game to follow. I had to start from scratch, reading up on the history and culture of Nagaland, the genesis of the insurgency and the prognosis for the future. Lt Gen KJ Singh had been the Col GS in Nagaland some years earlier, and he had also given me some background information. Though much of the dynamics had changed since then, it helped to understand the process by which we had reached the present stage. Within a month

or so, I felt confident enough to brief the Corps Commander, Lt Gen Arun Sahni (Artillery), who had been the Col GS of Kilo Force when I was the CO, 2 RR. He was at the fag end of his tenure though, and he was soon replaced by Lt Gen SL Narasimhan (Madras).[2]

During my tenure, I was made the enemy or 'Yellow Land' commander for the Corps War Game. Although I had a fair idea about Sikkim and Tawang, the area of 3 Corps, the Rest of Arunachal Pradesh (RALP) was new to me. Taking permission from the Corps Commander, I took briefings from the GOC of 2 Mountain Division and 56 Infantry Division, and went to some of the forward areas such as Kibithoo on the banks of the Lohit River, our Eastern-most Battalion location in the Walong Sector, which had been the scene of some fierce battles in the 1962 Sino-India war. Thus armed, I went back to Kohima, and Manuhar and I made out the Yellow Land offensive plan. We made quite an interesting plan, trying to catch the nuances of Chinese strategic thought and how they would like to win without fighting, or with the least amount of fighting. How they would apply their War Zone Concept if they were to launch a major offensive in the RALP. When I presented the outline plan to the Corps Commander, Lt Gen Narasimhan, he was sceptical about it but agreed to give it a try, provided it passed muster of the Control for logistical and tactical viability, the logistics part being the more important.

The Control tried their best to find a flaw in the plan, and they were thorough. They looked into every aspect of the mobilization by the PLA, by road, rail and air. Capacities and resources available for each mode of travel, turnaround times, including time taken for loading and unloading, length of runways and dispersals, availability of local resources and a dozen other factors. But Manuhar had done a terrific job; there

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were just no holes in the plan. Lt Gen Narasimhan could have watered down the plan, but he was too much of a professional to do so. Finally, the war game commenced in the presence of the Army Commander, Lt Gen Dalbir Singh Suhag.[3] The MGGS (Designate) of the Command, (then) Maj Gen Bipin Rawat, was also in attendance. I presented my plans and there was a short break thereafter to confer and decide on how to proceed. It became clear that Yellow Land had the mobilization deferential in their favour, and Blue Land (India) was at risk of defeat. Yellow Land had to be slowed down, but how? The Control conjured up a massive storm that made all the roads impassable and the airfields unfit for operations, thus delaying Yellow Land by forty-eight crucial hours, by which time Blue Land was able to move into their designated areas. The funny part though, was that it rained only on the Yellow Land side, 'the rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain'. I remonstrated with the Army Commander that this was not fair. Met conditions are known well in advance and if I had known of adverse weather conditions, I would have delayed the start of the operation by forty-eight hours. I pointed out that under similar conditions, Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion of Europe in WWII, had been postponed by twenty-four hours. To this, the Army Commander responded by saying, 'That was just a small-scale operation.' I could not believe my ears, and it took all my self-control not to smile. Blue Land won as usual, but in doing so, we did not learn the correct lessons. I was once again reminded of what President APJ Abdul Kalam had said, 'Don't read success stories, you will only get a message. Read failure stories, you will get some ideas to get success.'

A few months later was the Command War Game, which would be attended by the Chief, Gen Bikram Singh. For war games at the Command level, the functions of the 'enemy' are

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carried out by the Red Force (REDFOR) branch of the Army Training Command (ARTRAC), which was then headed by Lt Gen Madhok, who had been my colleague in PP Dte. In theory, since the ARTRAC is not under the Regional Command, it can make an independent plan, not always in consonance with what the Command would want to do. Hence a parallel Yellow Land was created and I was appointed to head it, since I had served in all the Corps and had also done the same job for the 3 Corps War Game. By now, Eastern Command had been taken over by Lt Gen MMS Rai (Engineers). The fulcrum around which the conduct depended was the MGGS, Maj Gen Bipin Rawat, who also acted as the Control on behalf of the Army Commander. Therefore, despite the 'enemy' being from an outside agency, the key to how the war game was to unfold remained within the Command. Not a very satisfactory arrangement, if one really wanted to validate your plans against the best that the enemy could throw at you. I proceeded to make my independent plans and the ARTRAC team made theirs, and it was decided that I should make the presentation to the Chief. Lt Gen Madhok came to know of this plan to undermine the role of the ARTRAC and offered to pull back his team, which would then not be present when the Chief visited. This would have created an embarrassing situation and in the end, it was the ARTRAC plan that was played. I did not mind though, as I had gained valuable experience, but this incident did give me food for thought, on the role of the ARTRAC and conduct of war games.

The AR Battalions continued carrying out their assigned tasks under the umbrella of the ceasefire. The militant cadres would roam about in ones and twos, with pistols tucked in their waistbands and hidden under their shirts, extorting money from the locals. The locals were quite fed up, as they had to pay

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all the rival groups, leaving very little for themselves. The rival groups tried to carve out exclusive zones where only their writ should run, which on occasion would lead to inter-factional clashes or targeted killings of rival leaders. As per the Cease Fire Ground Rules (CFGR), an agreed number of leaders was allowed to travel with their bodyguards, who were permitted to carry weapons. It was a bit of a grey area and our own troops had to operate in this grey zone of uncertainty, a task that I felt was more difficult than CI/CT operations in J & K, where at least troops could open fire. All the groups had a certain number of designated camps in which their cadres had to stay and the AR, or even the local police, were not supposed to enter these camps as per the terms of the CFGR. The largest of these was the NSCN (IM) camp at Hebron near Dimapur, which was like their General HQ. All the top leaders, including Isac and Muihwah, used to reside within the camp.

Another of the NSCN (IM) camps was at Mukalimi in the Zunheboto district, an area dominated by the Sumi tribe, to which Isac belonged. In end-December 2013, a few cadres from this camp misbehaved with some local women, leading to a stand-off between the villagers and the camp. The villagers demanded that the offending cadres be handed over to them to be tried as per Naga customary law. Strictly speaking, this was a local law-and-order issue and the AR should have had nothing to do with it. Nevertheless, we were told to try to secure the area of the camp to prevent any bloodshed. So here we were, protecting a camp of the NSCN (IM), who were technically our adversaries, from the wrath of the very people they claimed to represent. It was a tense two to three days. My class fellows from school had come to spend the New Year with me, but I was glued to the telephone or camping on a hillock from where I had a clear view of the camp as well as the village, ready to

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intervene if matters got too bloody. The Governor, Shri Ashwini Kumar, rang me up several times, asking, even ordering me to intervene, but I told him it was beyond my mandate. It was a Catch-22 situation for us. If we tried to take over the camp, the cadres may fire at us. On the other hand, the locals might view it as us siding with the guilty party, turn antagonistic and vent their ire on us. Why should we squander our goodwill to protect alleged rapists? We even contacted the NSCN (IM) leadership, saying that they should hand over the offenders to us, the AR, and we would ensure their safety till handed over to the police. This offer was not accepted, as it would imply that the NSCN (IM) had ceded their sovereignty to us. Ultimately, the villagers' patience ran out and they just stormed the camp armed with spears, machetes and shotguns, forcing the insurgents to flee. They burned down huts, offices and vehicles leaving only a church standing.[4] This incident underscored the fragility of the law-and-order situation, especially in the face of tribal dynamics that no outsider can ever fathom, as well as the waning influence of the NSCN (IM). The smoke rising from the burning camp could be seen from Kohima, and my friends got a glimpse of the work we do.

Nagaland has sixteen officially recognized tribes, which does not include the Tangkhul Nagas of Manipur, to which Muivah belongs. All the tribes have their own customs and traditions and even their own distinct language. They are fiercely independent and brook no interference in their tribal affairs, and have scant regard for the law of the land. Raiding police stations to capture an offender and then lynching him is not uncommon. One such incident happened in Dimapur itself. A local non-Naga was accused of molestation and had been arrested by the police and lodged in Dimapur Central Jail. A huge mob gathered outside the jail, surrounded it from all

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sides and started baying for his blood. The DGP rang up asking for Army assistance. Would it be possible, he asked, to send a chopper to hover over the jail, slither down, grab the prisoner and then extricate? I told him that yes, while technically feasible, such kind of small team operations are a specialized task carried out by the Special Forces. Furthermore, the location for the extraction had to be secure, which was not the case here. The chopper would be hovering at a very low height and extremely vulnerable to any interference from the mob. The possibility of insurgent cadres armed with AK-47s, mingling with the mob was high. I discussed the matter with the Corps Commander (by then Lt Gen Bipin Rawat had taken over), who concurred with my assessment. Matters came to a head when on 5 March 2015, the mob broke into the jail, going from cell to cell till they located the alleged offender. They dragged him out and paraded him naked, dragging the hapless person to the clock tower, about seven km away, all the while pelting him with stones, before hanging him for all the world to see.[5] The state administration should have been alert to this possibility and taken him to some undisclosed location, preferably outside the state. Tribal affiliations being so strong, no jail within the state would have been safe.

After completing her stint in Myanmar, Veena joined me in Kohima and was there when the Mukalimi incident occurred, keeping all the guests entertained and on a tight leash. Almost the entire family came to visit us at Kohima; Isha and Amala, Simon, my parents, Veena's mother, our brothers and sisters and, of course, our childhood friends. The last were more than happy for me to be posted to distant and exotic places that they could then visit. On the international school circuit, Veena got yet another job offer, this time for the British School in Colombo, Sri Lanka. It was a difficult decision to make, but

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in the absence of any openings in India, Veena decided to take it up, but only for a year, while I was in field area in Kohima. She left for Colombo on 14 July and was still in the process of settling down when she fell ill with dengue. She had to be rushed to hospital and was in the ICU for a couple of days. I rushed to Delhi, ready to take off for Colombo but Veena recovered enough that I did not have to make that trip.

Lt Gen Bipin Rawat, after his stint as MGGS, had taken over command of 3 Corps in late 2014. At that time, never could we have imagined that we would become the Chiefs of the Indian Army nor for that matter, that I would take over from him. He had seen me closely during the two war games and knew my capabilities quite well. I did not really have to impress him; it was too late for that. Whenever he used to visit, we would talk about many issues, not only about operations but also about the Army in general. On some issues, our ideas converged—on the gifting culture, for example, that had crept into the Army, or how standards of physical fitness were dropping. In fact, in one of the Divisional War Games, even Lt Gen Narasimhan had remarked that the Divisional Commanders looked slimmer and fitter than the Brigade Commanders. Though I had met him for the first time only when he came as the MGGS (Designate) for the Corps War Game, I developed a close bond and rapport with Gen Rawat.

Since the beginning of 2015, we had been keeping a close watch on the NSCN (K) camp at Zunheboto. This camp was where Niki Sumi, the self-styled commander of this group, used to stay, the main base being in Myanmar under its founder Khaplang. Niki Sumi's son used to study in the Sainik School, Punglwa, on the outskirts of Dimapur, and his wife stayed in Dimapur itself. After the winter break, the son had not rejoined the school, nor was his wife to be seen anywhere in

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Dimapur. All these small indicators had been picked up by our patrols, hence the increased surveillance of the camp. It was observed that the strength of the camp was also reducing over the weeks, something a casual observer would not have noticed. Information on Niki Sumi was also not forthcoming. This led me to believe that something was not quite right and I voiced my suspicions to both the Corps Commander as well as in my exit interview to the Army Commander.

In March 2015, the Chief of Staff of the Command rang me up asking whether I would be interested in moving as the MGGS of the Command. It was certainly an exciting proposition as the MGGS is a prestigious appointment, as the right-hand man of the Army Commander. But before I could even discuss this offer with Veena, I received my orders to move to Delhi as the Additional Director General (Information Systems) (ADG [IS]) in the Directorate General of Information Systems (DGIS). This came as quite a surprise to me as I had no technical background whatsoever, save for the computer course I had done on study leave. I left Nagaland on 15 March and barely a week later, the NSCN (K) unilaterally abrogated the ceasefire, exactly what we had been apprehensive about. They ambushed a water truck of the AR near Aboi in Mon district, killing six personnel and in another attack in Manipur, they killed eight Army personnel. These two attacks were responded to by surgical strikes on the NSCN (K) camps astride the Indo-Myanmar border. By then, though, I was already in Delhi and missed out on all the excitement.

The DGIS has two verticals, the first dealing with operational information systems and the second dealing with management information systems, each under an ADG. As the ADG (IS-B), I was responsible for the management information systems. This was a new field for me. Not only was there a technical side

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to it but also a procurement side. The Defence Procurement Manual (DPM) and the Delegation of Financial Powers to the Defence Services (DFPDS) became my new companions. The requirements were complex and the canvas quite wide. For example, the procurement of all IT hardware and software for the entire Indian Army was compiled by the DGIS. The formulation of the plan would commence by July each year and after being vetted by the Integrated Financial Adviser (IFA), promulgated by March the following year, just before the start of the new financial year. The IT PPP would run into over 100 pages with a proposed outlay running into thousands of crores. It was a daunting and challenging task.

Another MIS that was being developed was the ARPAN software, the Army Record Office Process Automation programme aimed at the digitization of all the Records Offices of the Army, something that I had observed during my tenure at the Regimental Centre. It was being developed jointly by the Army Software Development Centre (ASDC) and Tech Mahindra, using state-of-the-art web-based technology. It had been under development for some time, but many glitches remained unaddressed. Tech Mahindra had won the contract after a very competitive bidding process and due to the way the contract had been worded, they were not getting any payment either. We were asking for some of the add-ons which the company felt were beyond the terms of the original contract. Our view was that these add-ons being asked for were beyond the control of the Army and were only in pursuance of government orders. For example, the government had made Aadhaar mandatory only recently, but it was not there when the programme commenced. To make this inclusion would require many manhours of effort. There was a stalemate and the development of version 3.0 was being stalled.

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It took me some time to understand the different perspectives. The first and foremost issue I realized, was that of payment. The ARPAN programme was to be rolled out over forty-five Record Offices pan-India, the responsibility of which lay with the Army, and would take a few years. Tech Mahindra felt that their responsibility was to develop the software and once proven through test-bedding and acceptance trials, they should be paid in full. This was a fair argument because they had no say in the roll-out, which could take years. As it is they had already invested two years in this project and not seen a single rupee in return. We discussed the matter with the IFA who also saw that there was indeed a flaw in the way the contract was worded. He agreed that we could go in for phase-wise payments based on quantifiable milestones in terms of the number of Record Offices automated. Since the programme had already been test-bedded in seven ROs, the proportionate payment could be made to them straight away, and the same principle applied in the future without having to refer to him again. This was a big breakthrough; Tech Mahindra got some infusion of funds with a clear road map for future payments, yet we too retained control. It was a win-win solution. Thus enthused, and with their confidence restored, we could amicably resolve the rest of the issues. The ARPAN 3.0 version was launched live by the then Defence Minister, Shri Manohar Parrikar, in July 2015, coinciding with the National Digital India Week, which had been launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This was one of the success stories of the DGIS, but the real credit should go to the IFA, who interpreted the DPM and DFPDS in a pragmatic manner to get the job done.

In April, the Army Commanders' Conference was held and along with that, our Special Selection Board (SSB) for promotion to the rank of Lt Gen. The recommendations of the

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collegiate go to the MoD for concurrence, and the final results are declassified only some months later. Unofficially, I came to know that I had made the grade, once again for both the Command and Staff streams. That meant that I would have to move out on promotion quite soon. I took some leave and went to meet Veena in Colombo. Veena had a nice, modern two-room flat in Wellawetta called the Ben and Nancy Towers, not far from the seafront, with the Ramakrishna Mission right opposite. We spent a nice week together, taking walks on the beach and sampling the local delicacies. In view of my likely promotion and move, we decided that Veena should not renew her contract when the school term ended in June. I wondered about my old friends from my Trincomalee days and was able to locate Maj Shane Balthazar, who had retired as a Colonel. We went to his house for dinner and met his wife and children. We reminisced about those troubled days and he took out an album with photos of almost all the officers who had been with the Battalion then. I dare say that he had many more photos of me than I have myself.

The official results came out in October, and I was promoted in situ to the rank of Lt Gen in November 2016. Since I would have to take over a Corps soon, it was obvious that my stay in DGIS would not last long. As it so happened, my sojourn in DGSI lasted for barely seven months, but I feel I had made a difference. This much I know, that the DGIS, Lt Gen Matharu, was definitely sad to see me go.

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3.3

Kharga Corps and Delhi Area: From Operations to Administration

When the results were declared, I did my own analysis of where I might go next. I had served in all three Corps of Eastern Command—3, 4 and 33, but none of them were falling vacant just yet. I had also served in all the Corps of Northern Command—14,15 and 16, but that was when I was much junior and many years ago. I thought 17 Corps might be a good fit, since this Corps had its operational tasks all over the Northern Front with China. It was due for turnover too. Meanwhile, since I was posted in Delhi, I had to vacate the SF at Pratap Chowk. In due course, I was allotted a house in a new colony that had come up ahead of Vasant Kunj, now named Tarapore Enclave. I had taken over this house in the new colony, and as the first occupants, we had a lot of cleaning up to do. Still, by the beginning of October, we were ready to shift. The house was all packed, the truck standing outside the door, when I got a call from Lt Gen Amarjit Singh, the GOC, 2 Corps. I was wondering why this random call when he asked me what

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I was doing. Nothing much, I had replied, just packing up and moving out. Now it was his turn to be flummoxed, as he had called me up to tell me that I would be relieving him soon, but only in December. Quite naturally, he was wondering why I was packing up so early. That confusion was sorted out, but it still meant I had to shift out. If only he had called even forty-eight hours earlier, I could have avoided this double move.

By now, Isha and Simon had been dating for some time and had finally decided to get married. We were quite happy with this development, as till quite late, she was averse to the 'M' word and would avoid any discussion regarding marriage. Diwali was around the corner, so we decided to have a small engagement ceremony in the new house at Tarapore Enclave in mid-November. As it so happened, my promotion also came just then, so it was a double celebration. Isha and Simon exchanged rings and we exchanged a few token gifts between the family members, followed by high tea. We also decided that we could plan the wedding sometime in March 2016 during the Pathways School mid-term break.

By the time I took over 2 Corps in mid-December, the training year was almost half done. As per the schedule, the Corps War Game (WG) was scheduled for the first week of February 2016. As per the norm, the Chief, Gen Dalbir Singh Suhag, would be attending the WG. The Army Commander, Lt Gen KJ Singh asked me whether I wanted to get the WG postponed to get more time to settle down. It was a tempting offer. 2 Corps is a 'Strike Corps', meaning a Corps that has an offensive role and is meant to strike deep into enemy territory. The main punch of the Strike Corps lay in its mechanized formations, the 1 Armoured Division and the 16(I) Armoured Brigade. Not only would this be my first time commanding armoured formations, but the last time I had served on the

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Western front with Pakistan was as a Major when the unit was at Meerut in 1996–97. It was almost fifteen years since then, and the intervening years had mostly been spent in the East. The key staff appointments, Brig Vipul Shinghal, the BGS, and Brig Rajesh Pushkar, the Brig Q, had also just joined on termination of their Brigade Commands. The only old hand was the Col GS (Ops), Col Jitender Kumar, an AD officer.[1] I thought to myself that going ahead with the original date would be better as it would force me to familiarize myself that much faster. Work expands to fill the available time, and postponing the event would only mean that I would have less time to implement the lessons learnt from the WG. I therefore told the Army Commander that we would go ahead as planned.

The next six weeks went by in a whirl. We visited each of the Divisions, including the Artillery Division, the Indep Brigades—including the Indep AD Bde, commanded by Brig Vikrant Naik—and as many Brigades and units as possible. At each place, I only listened to what the commanders had to say, just letting all this information and an altogether different set of terminologies seep in. Since most of this was new to me, I would make copious notes and would sit down every evening making small aide-memoires on multicoloured 2" x 4" cards for my ready reference, poring over the maps of the area.

Over the years, given that the area of operations is more or less the same, all possible permutations and combinations have already been played. Year after year, there are only minor changes in terrain, a new bridge somewhere or a wider and better road somewhere else, an increment of a unit or two, but nothing that could make a radical difference to the plans. It was a common practice to dust off the plans of the last few WGs and see which of those could be played yet again, with some minor variations. We tried to make a somewhat different offensive

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plan even though we knew it would come up for some serious debate. The designated 'enemy' or Red Land commander was Maj Gen Bhinder, who was the GOC 31 Armoured Division of South-Western Command.[2] He came to me wanting to know if there was anything in particular that I would like him to do. I told him that I could not possibly dictate what the enemy could or could not do and gave him a free hand. I never asked him his plans until they were played, and that too in my capacity as Control. My Control was headed by Brig Mohit Malhotra, Commander 16 (I).[3] Acutely conscious of my experiences in Eastern Command, I gave him a free hand too, to evaluate each engagement purely on merit. All in all, the WG went off well, the Chief was satisfied and he remarked in private to the Army Commander that I seemed to have 'taken to mechanized warfare like a duck to water' (as told to me later by the Army Commander). The DGMO, Maj Gen Ranbir Singh,[4] who had done the HC course with me, called up to say that the Chief had told him that it was a professionally conducted WG. He rang off by saying that now that the WG, the most important event in a Corps Commander's tenure was over, what was I going to do the rest of the time?!

I did not have to wait long to find out. February 2016 also saw the Jat agitation, a series of violent protests in the state of Haryana, which paralysed the state for ten days. At least twenty people died and over 200 were injured when they went on a frenzy of destruction to demand reservations in government jobs for their community. There were also unconfirmed reports of mass rapes. The agitators laid siege to Rohtak and blocked the National Highway between Delhi and Ambala in the vicinity of Murthal. They also blocked the railway line, disrupting rail traffic and leading to the cancellation of almost all trains. We had started getting calls from the civil administration asking for

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Army assistance, as early as 8–9 February. However, to do so we would require a formal requisition asking for our assistance in 'aid to civil authority', as well as clearance from the MoD, which is dependent on a similar requisition from the MHA. This was absolutely mandatory, as otherwise, falsehoods are raised about the Army attempting a 'coup', which kind of controversy is best avoided.

At Rohtak, the protestors had laid siege to the city, not allowing anyone to move in or out. They indulged in acts of arson and violence, including setting on fire the residence of Shri Abhimanyu Singh, the state finance minister (brother of Capt RS Sindhu of my unit). The nearest Army troops were those of 31 Armoured Division based at Hissar, and these troops were mobilized, but the agitators had anticipated this move and blocked the roads. It was then decided to send columns of 22 Infantry Division from the garrison at Delhi, which came under 2 Corps. These columns also found their way along the main roads blocked, but by making several detours and using smaller village roads, one or two columns managed to reach Rohtak. However, this strength was not adequate and additional columns were ferried in by helicopter into a large ground, which had been converted into a makeshift control centre. Since the columns had been flown in, they did not have any vehicles and had to carry out the flag marches on foot. These flag marches did much to restore the peace as well as the confidence of the local population. As several government forces were milling about, and due to the similarities in the uniform, it was often difficult to make out which were the Army columns. Nevertheless, our boys did a wonderful job. I too flew in during the initial days of the deployment and I was disheartened to see the extent of the damage. I could feel the palpable sense of fear among the locals and civil administration.

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On the National Highway, the scene was no better. The agitators had not only blocked the highway but also vandalized vehicles on the road and buildings and dhabas alongside. A large number of civilians caught up in the violence had to seek refuge in the better-known eateries like Haveli and Sukhdev, though they too were not totally spared. The Army columns had the sensitive task of not only maintaining the peace but also evacuating our distressed countrymen and women. Some senior Army officers were also caught up in the blockade and while extracting them was our priority, they were also our eyes and ears and gave us valuable intelligence on how to proceed. By and by, through the great maturity shown by the officers heading these columns, we were able to pacify the mob. All the stranded persons were taken to safety. The agitators were persuaded to allow at least one carriageway to be opened so that all the stranded vehicles could be moved out. They were also convinced to lift the *rail-roko*, the blockage of the railway tracks that was causing inconvenience to so many thousands of people, by appealing to their conscience.

The government appointed a committee headed by former Director General of Police Prakash Singh to, 'find commissions and omissions on the part of police and administrative officials'. He was scathing in his report and questioned the functioning of the police department as well as the civil administration, who chose to ignore intelligence inputs and tried to play down the possibility of any agitation. In a damning indictment about the role of the state police, the report observed, 'The state could not possibly complain of a shortage of manpower. What was lacking was the will to act.' He wrote in his report, 'You would have seen cops running away, but wouldn't have ever seen Army running away.' The papers also reported that '5000 [Army personnel] could do what 50,000 [police] could not.'[5]

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Next was Isha's and Simon's wedding. From the time the Jat agitation was over, it was barely four weeks to the wedding. Veena had been doing all the spadework, but it was also my responsibility to get involved. As with the engagement ceremony, the wedding too was to be a modest affair. Family members, of course, and close childhood friends, plus some Regimental officers and officers on staff at the Corps HQ. I don't think the guest list would have exceeded a hundred guests all told. We had planned for the wedding and the evening reception on the lawns of the house but on that day, 12 March, it poured like never before. The mandap was hastily relocated to under the porch of the driveway and all the guests stood in the veranda, craning their necks to get a look at the proceedings. It was a pious Hindu ceremony, followed by blessings being given to the couple by the padre from the local church. This church was famous, on account of the fact that, being close to the Ambala Air Force Station, it had received a direct hit by Pakistani bombs in the 1971 war. The evening reception had to be shifted to the Officers' Mess, it being the only place that could accommodate so many guests. Even today, when we think back to that day or speak to our friends, what everyone remembers most is the torrential rain that had turned the lawn into a swimming pool.

We had returned from the reception in Delhi when I got up one morning with excruciating back pain. I could barely get out of bed, let alone bend over to wash my face. I had back sprains earlier but always as a result of something—picking up something heavy or straining a bit more during games. However, there was no apparent trigger for this spasm. I went to sleep fit and fine and woke up nearly disabled. I reported sick and the Medical Officer gave me the standard treatment, some painkillers and pain-relieving gel and the usual hot

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compress. However, the pain just wouldn't go away. I went to the Command Hospital at Chandimandir, followed by the Army Hospital R&R at Delhi but to no avail. Despite a battery of tests, they could find nothing wrong—at least nothing that could explain this spasm that had almost become permanent. With each Specialist adding more medicines to the prescription, I was taking more than a dozen pills a day. All through this, I continued with my visits to the formations and units and even to the field firing ranges, where I somehow managed to worm my way into the turret of a tank and fire an anti-tank missile. After about four months of this, I got fed up. The medicines were not making any difference, treating the symptoms and not the cause. I consulted my friend Milind Modak, who is an orthopaedist and has his own hospital in Pune, and took a two-week session of physiotherapy, which gave some relief, but nothing worked. So, I stopped taking the medicines altogether and actually started improving. I concentrated on building up my core strength and doing some yoga. By the end of the year, I could do everything, except bend forwards. I used to say in jest to my colleagues, 'I'll break but I won't bend'. I carried this condition right through and even as the Chief, I took all possible precautions that no programme or event should ever get cancelled because of my back. I gave up playing golf so as not to precipitate any spasms. I still get a twinge now and then and have a dull ache all the time, what the doctors call chronic pain, but I never gave up, and today, I am playing golf four times a week.

The GOC of 1 Armoured Division was Maj Gen Ajai Singh.[6] He was an extremely competent officer, meticulous and with an eye for detail. I remember that the first time I visited the Division, I inquired about something while we were at dinner. We had an early start the next morning and I went

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to bed. When we met the next morning, he handed over a concise brief answering the previous evening's question. I was impressed by his dedication. Ajai had been nominated to make a presentation during the Army Commanders' Conference on light tanks, their role, capabilities and relevance in the Indian context. He showed me his presentation, which had too much detail. The Army Commanders already knew the background and would be briefed on this topic before the conference. Stating the obvious would be superfluous, particularly when half of them were Armoured Corps officers. I told him to just concentrate on the last part, the relevance in the Indian context, and to force a decision. Do we need them or not? Ajai reworked his presentation, cutting it down by half, and he told me later that it had been well received. Nothing much came out of it though, and it needed a crisis to get the light tank centre stage again. Work on the light tank 'Zorawar' has now commenced post the Ladakh crisis of 2020.

Ajai had also decided to enrol himself for a PhD programme at the Punjabi University, Patiala. As per the rules, anyone wanting to pursue higher studies had to take permission from his immediate superior officer; in this case, from me. This is not a restrictive clause but actually exists to protect the student, whether an officer or a jawan. By granting permission, the organization is also committing itself to grant leave to the individual whenever required, for examinations or field trips, even if they conflict with official engagements. When Ajai came to me to take the formal permission, I casually mentioned how it was a good thing that he was doing and how I wished I could do the same. Ajai immediately swung into action. I had left the next day for an outstation visit, but he took all the requisite details from my PA, Hav SK Tiwari, filled up the forms online and even made the payment from his own pocket. When I

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returned a couple of days later, he came to meet me once again, with the admission formalities all completed. There was just one hitch, he told me nonchalantly, which was that I'd have to sit for an entrance examination. This was more than what I had bargained for, but I could not fault him for using his initiative. Now that the die had been cast, there was no option but to follow through. It was strange to go to the University, show the admit card and sit for the exam surrounded by young boys and girls in their twenties and thirties. Apparently, I qualified and was admitted to the PhD programme in the Department of Defence and Strategic Studies.

When I was promoted to the rank of Lt Gen, it also put me in the run to become an Army Commander, as I had adequate residual service on my side, being one of the youngest in the batch. However, my turn would come in due course, as and when the current Army Commanders superannuated, which was still more than a year away. I would have to do one more tenure before that. The tenure of a Corps Commander is only one year, so I would have to move out by December 2016. I did not have any particular preference, nor did anyone ask me for any choice. In the first week of December, I received orders to move to Delhi as the GOC Delhi Area. Delhi Area functions under the Western Command itself, so while I would be changing locations, my boss would remain the same, i.e. the Army Commander Western Command, which by then had been taken over by Lt Gen Surinder Singh (Mech Inf). Another development that took place in December was the appointment of Lt Gen Bipin Rawat, then the VCOAS, as the next Chief. This change suddenly catapulted me into the fray to become the next Chief, purely on the basis of seniority. However, the government had appointed Gen Rawat as the Chief, overlooking two of his seniors, so this was just speculation.

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I reached Delhi in the first week of January 2017, just ten days ahead of the Army Day, which falls on 15 January. The day symbolizes when General KM Cariappa became the first Indian Commander-in-Chief of Independent India, having taken over from General Sir FRR Bucher, on 15 January 1949. Delhi Area is responsible for the conduct of the Army Day Parade at the Cariappa Parade Ground in Delhi Cantt, as well as the Republic Day Parade on Kartavya Path (erstwhile Raj Path). Preparations and rehearsals had been going on since November and were under control, but I too needed to get into the picture. Maj Gen Rajesh Sahai, who was the COS, brought me up to speed. The schedule was for a full-scale rehearsal on the 11th, with the GOC, Delhi Area as the Reviewing Officer, followed by the Western Command Investiture Parade on the 13th, with the Army Commander as the Reviewing Officer, and finally the Army Day Parade on the 15th, with the Chief, Gen Bipin Rawat taking the salute. There was barely a week to go before my full dress rehearsal, hence the very day after reaching Delhi, I was at the parade ground. It would be Gen Rawat's first Army Day Parade as Chief and that made it all the more important that it should be flawless. The parade was conducted with military precision and the credit must go to the COS and his team who had actually done the heavy lifting. By the time I took over, the parade was already set.

The Army Day Parade though, is just a precursor to the Republic Day Parade (RDP) that follows. The RDP is conducted under the aegis of the MoD, with responsibilities assigned to each Service. However, the majority of the tasks come to the Army and down to Delhi Area. The sheer effort involved is hard to describe. From getting the Services contingents together, then getting the other CAPF contingents under our wing, followed by the NCC and other marching contingents, and finally the state tableaux

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and dance troupes. Marshalling all these diverse elements coming from different places in the correct sequence at Vijay Chowk, and releasing them in sequence at precisely the right time and with the same precise gap between various contingents. Various elements also go at different speeds, the mechanized columns and vehicles are faster than the marching contingents. The camel-borne contingent has its own pace altogether. All these variables have to be kept in mind, so that irrespective of what time the contingents start from Vijay Chowk, they must cross the saluting dais at the appointed minute. Communication arrangements have to be foolproof and the public address system par excellence. Coordination also has to be done with the commentators, to ensure that the correct script is read out at the right time, just as the contingent or troupe is approaching and passing by the saluting dais. Recovery arrangements have to be put in place just in case some vehicle breaks down, so that it can be whisked away without upsetting the flow of the parade. Coordinating the fly-past is an even more complex and gut-wrenching exercise. All this is quite similar to the backstage activities that the audience never realizes or gets to see.

The GOC Delhi Area leads the Parade, i.e., he is in the first Gypsy vehicle that rolls down Kartavya Path and gives the salute to the President of India and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces on behalf of the entire country. It is a very emotional and supercharged moment. All my close family members were in the audience—Veena, Isha and Amala (who had come down from Singapore), Simon and other friends and relatives. It was an emotional moment for them too, to see their father as the torchbearer of the hopes and aspirations of an entire nation. Standing erect in the first vehicle, looking neither left nor right, one is acutely conscious that the eyes of the entire nation are on you. It is an unforgettable experience.

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The Army has Corps and Areas, both commanded by Lt Gens. and subordinate to Command HQ. Whereas Corps have an operational role, Areas are more focused on administration. The Areas and the Sub-Areas that fall under it form an administrative grid on which the field army rides. 2 Corps at Ambala, for example, in times of war would mobilize and get deployed anywhere in Punjab. They could not possibly be looking over their shoulder for their requirements of daily maintenance, which would be the function of the Area or Sub-Area it was dependent on. It is an important function, of which most people, even those in uniform, are unaware. Moreover, being purely administrative assignments, postings to the Area or Sub-Area are considered to be dead-end postings with no future career prospects, which is not really so.

Unlike other Area HQs, which have Sub-Areas under them, Delhi Area is a stand-alone Area looking after all the administrative aspects in the entire Delhi NCR. The housing needs of all personnel posted in Delhi, including the provision of essential services such as water and electricity, are met by Delhi Area. It is a humongous task; there are no fewer than ninety married-accommodation colonies for officers and JCOs/OR, catering to more than 22,000 married personnel and approximately 40,000 or so personnel staying in the units in Other Than Married (OTM) accommodation. All this existing infrastructure requires periodic maintenance to keep it habitable and there is a dedicated budget of approximately Rs 330–350 crore per year. Budgets are always finite and one has to juggle between different priorities. Water availability remains a challenge and contracts have to be negotiated with the Delhi Jal Board to get as much water released as possible. New civil works have to be initiated at an average of Rs 200–300 crore per annum and those in progress monitored for quality of construction. It

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was our constant endeavour to ensure high standards of habitat for the residents. We also kept ourselves aligned with various government directives for Smart Cities, giving stimulus to digitization, sustainability and integrated planning. In doing so, Delhi Cantt was the first Discom to have initiated power trading, thereby providing impetus to digitization and savings to the exchequer. The Cantt Board too has to be managed and the functions coordinated to avoid duplication of effort and wasteful expenditure, for which my experience as the AQ at Chakrata came in handy.

There are as many as thirteen land parcels all over Delhi, amounting to approximately 8000 acres, some unoccupied, that have to be kept under watch. The security of all the personnel is also the responsibility of the Area, including preventing thefts and burglaries. The GOC, Delhi Area is also the Estate Officer with authority to levy fines in case of unauthorized occupation of family quarters with powers akin to a judge. The educational needs of the children have also to be met and that too comes under the purview of the Delhi Area. The educational institutes under Delhi Area range from schools catering for kindergartens, high secondary and colleges, including a medical college. As the GOC, being the Patron of all these educational institutes, one has to really go into detail to ensure all facets of incisive growth and selection of faculty to improve the standards. The sheer range and scope of activities carried out by Delhi Area is mind-boggling. The multidimensional facets of this appointment project challenges that need immense energy and positivity to deal with. It was quite like managing a municipal corporation. But it is also a great learning experience and one that stood me in good stead.

The second most important ceremonial activity, which is once again coordinated by Delhi Area, is Independence Day.

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The Prime Minister's address to the Nation from the ramparts of the Red Fort is an event seen and heard by millions of people worldwide. Right from the day in 1947 when the tricolour was hoisted for the first time in independent India, the GOC Delhi area has been part of the ceremony. That flag has been carefully preserved and is on display in the Army Battle Honours Mess in Delhi. On the Prime Minister's arrival at the Red Fort, he is accorded a ceremonial Guard of Honour and then escorted to the ramparts by the GOC, where the Service Chiefs are waiting. The Prime Minister then moves up to the embrasure on the rampart to hoist the national flag. During the address to the nation, it was customary for the GOC to stand a few paces to the rear. During the final rehearsal for the 15 August event, the SPG, which looks after the PM's security, conveyed that the GOC could stand a little further to the rear. The Defence Secretary, Shri Sanjay Mitra, and the COS, Maj Gen Rajesh Sahai, were both present at this rehearsal-cum-security review meeting. While the Defsec had no issues with this arrangement, the COS quite rightly said that he would have to convey this request to the Army HQ as it was beyond his mandate to approve such a change. The COS returned to the HQ after the rehearsal and this issue of where the GOC is to stand dominated the discussion in South Block. My view was that we don't take orders from the SPG but from the Chief, and we would abide by his decision. The matter continued to simmer until Gen Rawat rang me up on the 14th evening. 'Why do you want to stand like an ADC throughout the address?' he said. 'Just sit down with the rest of us and then go back to escort the PM after the event is over.' And that is just what I did.

Some people, however, who were obviously not in the know, tried to create a controversy out of it. There were dozens of messages on social media that went viral, about how the Armed

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Forces have been insulted and how rather than stand to the back of the embrasure, the GOC had taken a 'stand by sitting down'. I was blissfully unaware of this raging controversy as my mobile was at home and I came to know of it only after I returned. I rang up the Chief to clarify that it was only his orders that I had followed and that there was no intention of creating any controversy. Gen Rawat was pretty cool about it. He told me not to bother; these things will happen. Especially now that I was in line to succeed him, there would be many detractors waiting to pounce and discredit me. I should just continue to do my job as I always had. He would take care of the rest. In the evening was the 'At Home', a reception hosted by the President at Rashtrapati Bhawan. Gen and Mrs Rawat and my wife and I were standing side by side when the President and the PM walked by, greeting all the guests. The President conveyed his appreciation for a well-conducted event. When the PM passed by, he said to me with a smile, '*General Sahib, kyon marwate ho*?' referring, I suppose, to the morning's incident. I looked at Gen Rawat with a rueful smile. When we got back, I recounted this incident to Isha, Amala and Simon and we all had a hearty laugh. Before going to bed, I turned to Veena and jokingly remarked, 'There go my chances of becoming Chief,' and went to sleep soundly.

With such a large garrison at Delhi, it was not only the men but the families that also had to be looked after, including their basic needs such as medical and education. The NCR also has a large population of veterans whose needs also had to be taken into account. Due to the peculiar conditions of service, with postings taking place at short intervals and at any time during the academic year, Army kids would find it difficult to get admission in the new station. Even if they did, it might involve a change in school uniform and perhaps even syllabus.

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The Army therefore runs its own educational institutions—the Army Public Schools (APS). Delhi has three of them; APS, Dhaula Kuan is the oldest, APS, Delhi Cantt, and APS, Shankar Vihar, the most recent. While the day-to-day functioning of the school rests with the respective principals, the overall administration of these schools also came within the purview of the Area. All the APS, not just in Delhi, are run on shoestring budgets. Since the schools are run as a welfare measure, the fee charged from the parents is the bare minimum and, as far as possible, within the CEA of Rs 2250 per child per month. The fees so collected are just about sufficient to cater for the salaries of the staff, which are also nowhere near what is given in private schools, which can charge larger fees, or government-run schools, which get grants-in-aid. Yet we are supposed to follow and implement all the relevant state and Central rules. How are we supposed to implement the 25 per cent quota for the Economically Weak Section (EWS) students when the school itself is economically weak? Or will our children have to learn a new third language, the language of the state their parent is posted to, every two years, placing them at a perennial disadvantage? These issues had to be addressed at the state level with the Delhi government and larger issues had to be taken up with the Army HQ. Many of these issues remain unresolved because, when new policies are made, the views of the Armed Forces are not sought, and once a new policy is promulgated, it takes a lot of time and effort to make any amendments.

Lt Gen PM Hariz, the Southern Army Commander, was retiring in December 2017, against which vacancy I would be promoted to the rank of Army Commander. It made logical sense for me to go to Pune and that is what the rumour mills also suggested. Imagine my surprise, therefore, when the posting

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came not for Southern Command, Pune, but for ARTRAC, Shimla, 180 degrees in the opposite direction. So, after less than a year in Delhi, it was time to move again. Delhi Area had been one of the most challenging tenures of my career.

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3.4

Bharat Darshan and Eastern Command

After their wedding at Ambala, Isha and Simon went on their honeymoon to Manali and Shimla. Isha had fallen in love with Shimla, the quaint colonial-style houses, each with a history of its own, and the wooded hills, with their forests of pine and enticing timber trails. When they came back to Ambala, Isha remarked, 'I wish you get posted to Shimla.' Well. I guess her wishes were heard and answered. When my posting came to the ARTRAC rather than to one of the operational commands, whispers started floating around that I was being sidelined and out of the running for the top job. I had neither canvassed for any assignment nor had Gen Rawat asked me for my choice nor indeed given even a hint of what he was planning for me. Right from the time Gen Ashok Kapur had sent me to the Regimental Centre as a young Captain, I had always gone with the flow. '*Akhir kismat naam ki bhi kuchh cheez hoti hai*'—there's also something called destiny.

Unlike all other appointments, where there is a four- to seven-day handing/taking-over period when both the officers are in station, the same is not the convention when it comes to Army Commanders. One person leaves the garrison and only then does the next incumbent arrive. Veena and I staged forward

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to Chandigarh, so we would have to cover less distance the next day. On the morning of 1 December, we started by road while my predecessor, Lt Gen Robin Soni, left by air to take over as Army Commander Southern Command. Immediately on arrival, I reviewed the Guard of Honour at Annadale, possibly the only flat piece of ground in Shimla, which also doubles up as the helipad. Then to a War Memorial of sorts right on the main road, just outside the main gate, to pay homage to our brave soldiers and finally, to the office where I was introduced to the officers.

HQ ARTRAC has a very different role and organizational structure as compared with the other regional commands. To start with, it does not have any operational role whatsoever. It has no troops under its command. In fact, the HQ ARTRAC falls within the administrative jurisdiction of Western Command for many purposes. Based on its training role, the organogram of the HQ was quite different, without the traditional branches one was accustomed to. At ARTRAC, the main branches were the Training Branch, the Doctrine Branch and the Red Forces (REDFOR) Branch, each headed by a Maj Gen. When I initially assumed charge, it took me some time to figure out which branch handled what. Sometimes I would even ask my SPS, a civilian by the name of Ajay, who had been there for many years, for advice. He had seen many Army Commanders come and go and was a rich source of information on what were the pitfalls to avoid. Soon after taking over, I called on the Governor, Acharya Devvrat, and the Chief Minister, Shri Jai Ram Thakur.[1]

As the Army Commander, I was now authorized a Military Adviser for whom I chose Brig Satish Dahiya of 14 SIKH LI. For the Col MS and ADC, I recalled Col Katoch and Capt Amit Uppal. Col Katoch joined me in Shimla, leaving

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his family behind in Ambala. It was a strange twist of events. However, it was a boon to have the same competent officers on the team as it only speeded up the process of settling down. Amit, though, had become a little too senior to continue being an ADC, and once we had settled down, he was replaced by Capt Taran Niroula, also from Lucky Seven. It was important to choose the secretariat staff wisely because they had to reflect the personality of their 'boss', be on the same wavelength and most importantly, not take advantage of their position.

The main role of the ARTRAC is the formulation and dissemination of concepts and doctrines of warfare based on which, each of the training institutions coming under the ARTRAC can then formulate their own training philosophy and curriculum, based on their role. ARTRAC thus acts as the nodal agency for all institutional training in the Army. Apart from this, it also evolves joint doctrines in conjunction with other Services. The ARTRAC has thirty-two major training institutions under it, ranging from the Pre-Commissioning Training Academies (PCTA), such as the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun, to the Army War College (AWC), Mhow. These establishments are spread all over India, from the High-Altitude Warfare School (HAWS) at Gulmarg in the North, to the Officers' Training Academy (OTA) in the South; and from the Electronics and Mechanical Engineering (EME) School, Baroda in the West to the Counter Insurgency and Jungle Warfare (CIJW) School, Vairengte, in the East. As the Army Commander ARTRAC, it would be my job to visit all of them to ensure that 'No soldier or officer should ever lose his life or limb in combat because he was inadequately trained'. No wonder then, when I had gone to meet Gen Rawat prior to leaving Delhi he said, '*Jao, thoda Bharat darshan karo*' (Go and make a tour of the country).

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That was easier said than done. Shimla has only a small airfield, that too at Jubbarhatti, 22 km away, suitable only for small propeller aircraft, such as the IAF Dornier aircraft. This would take us to Delhi, about an hour's flying time, before changing over to an Avro for another two to three hours in the air, depending on the final destination, plus refuelling halts, if any. This itself would take up a full day either way. Add to that the two to three days visiting that institution meant that for each visit, we would be out of Shimla for nearly an entire week. The first time we flew in the Avro, the CO of the squadron told me that very soon they would be getting modern aircraft, the C-295 to replace the vintage Avro. That did not happen as the first C-295 was inducted into the IAF only in October 2023, which just shows how long and convoluted the acquisition process is. A couple of days in Shimla to take stock of the HQ and pass instructions and then it was off again. These visits were not only to the training establishments but also to the various Commands for their war games and to Delhi for conferences. I don't think I ever spent more than a week at a stretch at Shimla. During these visits, I would go around the various locations where the training was in progress, to see whether the curriculum was contemporary, using the latest training aids and methodologies and was in keeping with our operational philosophy.

Obviously, what was applicable for a PCTA, which trains cadets, would not necessarily be applicable for the AWC, which trains officers. Similarly, there would be differences in the curriculum of the Infantry School vis-à-vis the Armoured or Artillery School. Or for that matter, in the training methodology between the EME School, which imparts technical training, as compared to the CIJW School, which is purely a tactical course. This called for an in-depth knowledge of each of the branches of the Army, what roles they were expected to fulfil

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in war and peace, and then to see if the training was structured to meet that requirement. Each training establishment runs a number of courses, depending on its role. The Infantry School, for example, runs courses for officers, JCOs and jawans, and for differing levels of seniority even within this categorization. The Army War College, on the other hand, runs courses only for officers—the JC, SC and HC courses. Sometimes, the training establishments lost sight of the objective of a particular course being run by them. Over the years, new topics get added, and with each addition, the schedule gets tighter, with the result that students don't get adequate time for either preparation or assimilation. This was one of the aspects that I would particularly look into and deconflict the syllabus where possible. The purpose of any course was not to make a soldier a superhero but a competent and capable member of the team. During one of my visits to the Infantry School, in my address to the officers, one of them raised a point that the YO Course should not be graded, as a Young Officer getting a 'C' grading would get demotivated right at the beginning of his career. There was a hush in the hall when I revealed that I, too, had got a 'C' in the YOs, but there I was, right at the top, highlighting that it is sustained hard work and dedication that matters.

Of all the places, I ended up visiting Mhow the most, as it had three of the most prestigious establishments, the Infantry School, the MCTE and the Army War College, each commanded by a Lt Gen. To get to Mhow, it was first by air to Indore via Delhi and then by helicopter to Mhow. For this, the IAF helicopter would come from Gwalior or any other AF station, flying for maybe two hours for the fifteen-minute flight from Indore to Mhow, a forty-five-minute road trip. This I thought was quite superfluous and wasteful and started doing the Indore to Mhow leg by road. Veena was very happy

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whenever we did this because she hated getting into choppers. If anything, it was always my endeavour to keep things simple. At Mhow, for example, all three Commandants would come to the helipad to receive me. I discontinued that practice straightaway. Not only should no one come to the helipad, except the Liaison Officer, but there should be no presentation of bouquets and such. It took some time, but when the point was driven home again and again, the changes began to take effect. Fortunately, Rawat was of the same view and these were some of the thoughts we had batted around in Dimapur, so I knew he would back me up.

By now, I had attended hundreds of war games either as a student or in the formations or even conducted them myself. If there was a common thread running through them all, and I had experienced it first-hand, it was that Blue Land (India) always won. We even had software to predict the outcome of engagements, but these results, if not favouring Blue Land, were invariably overturned by the Control. This was the most serious in the HC course, where the war game is on 'actuals'. The students would be drawing the wrong lessons and even worse, on termination of the course, go to their new assignments and make the same mistakes. Only this time, the enemy would be real. At HQ ARTRAC, we coined the quote, 'It is better to lose on the sand model, than on the field of battle', and asked that it should be put up in all the sand-model rooms where the war games are played.

My father and mother, and Veena's mother, were to join us for the summer months. Isha and Simon were to come too, as soon as the term break commenced. The Western Command War Game was scheduled for the middle of the month and we had planned it in such a manner that our parents would come from Pune to Chandigarh by air on the last day of the WG, and

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we would then drive up together. All three were in their eighties, my father the eldest at eighty-eight. Coordinating their move with wheelchairs and all had been a major exercise. It had been equally difficult to convince my mother to undertake the trip. Everything went smoothly and everyone reached the airport, but then there was an unexpected delay due to a major sandstorm at Chandigarh that affected visibility. After a delay of a few hours, all the flights were cancelled and my parents returned home. This was a big disappointment; the weather in Shimla was at its best, and they would have really enjoyed their stay. After about two weeks, we decided to try again, but this time my mother point-blank refused to travel. She was convinced she had a 'jinx' because of which the flight had been cancelled. Anyway, my father and mother-in-law did come, and this time everything went off smoothly as planned. One Sunday evening, we had just finished dinner and were getting ready for bed when my sister rang up from Pune to say that my mother had suffered a heart attack and passed away. It was 22 July, and she was just a few months short of her eighty-eighth birthday. It was a shock, as I had just spoken to her that morning, giving her all the news from Shimla and all seemed well. Unfortunately, I hadn't been on leave since May, so that was the last time I saw her. I had to break the news to my father, who was so distraught that he had not been there for her final moments. The whole night he kept pacing in his room, packing all his stuff, ready to depart for Pune. I rang up the Chief and took his permission to proceed on leave and all four of us did the sombre journey to Pune. Isha and Amala also fetched up, to console me. I had always been my mother's laadka, her favourite, and it was a strange feeling that I would never see her again.

We had some fun times in Shimla too. Walks on the Ridge or through the forest trails. Of the two, the walks on the Ridge

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were the more dangerous as we would invariably end up having gulab jamuns at the iconic eatery Baljees, the aroma being just too hard to resist. We also made some good friends—Raja Bhasin, an expert on Shimla whose walking tour of Shimla is an experience in itself. Chander Mahajan, an elderly gentleman and an expert bridge player, who introduced us to Prabodh and Anurita Saxena, and we would all play bridge together on a Sunday afternoon. In fact, we became such good friends with the Saxenas that when they came to Kolkata for their son's graduation, they managed to find time to come to our residence and play a round of bridge.

We also patronized the Gaiety Theatre, perhaps the oldest in Asia. Established in 1887, it was designed by Henry Irwin and many of our renowned stars, like Anupam Kher and Naseeruddin Shah, began their careers here. Veena, who is fond of the theatre, through her contacts and with the help of Commodore Ahluwalia, managed to stage a play by the theatre director Feisal Alkazi, which was quite a coup. We also got the famous ghazal singer Sudip Banerjee and the equally famous Sufi singers Char Yaar to perform at the Gaiety. With our active involvement, it became a happening place. One of the unique features of this theatre is that each year, they stage a members' play in which the members themselves play the various parts. For the year that we were there, we had chosen *Twelve Angry Jurors*, a play by Reginald Rose, to be staged in October. Unfortunately, we weren't around to see the final performance, as a fresh set of orders was ready for me.

This time it was to go as the Army Commander, Eastern Command, and assume command on 1 September 2018. I wasn't expecting any posting as I had been in Shimla for just a little over six months. Apparently, I needed to be given experience of an operational command; I wasn't out of the race just yet. Once

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again, Gen Rawat gave me no hint of what was in store. The Combined Commanders' Conference, a tri-service conference of all the Chiefs and all the Army Commander equivalents of the three services, was scheduled for the end of August at Jodhpur, which the Prime Minister would attend. The orders came barely a week or so before that. I rushed back after the Conference on 30 August and drove up from Chandigarh to Shimla at night. On the 31st, I completed all the formalities and was given a farewell lunch, after which we drove down to Chandigarh for the night, having spent exactly nine months in Shimla. Veena had to do all the packing in my absence, something she had become an expert at. The next morning, we were on a flight bound for Kolkata. My friends in Shimla were most upset, especially Raja Bhasin, who was working feverishly on the play. This would be my seventh posting to Eastern Command beginning from the first one as a 2/Lt bound for Gangtok. Would it be Lucky Seven?

On the flight to Kolkata, I thought about my tenure at ARTRAC. Pushing myself, I had managed to visit as many as twenty-five out of the thirty-two training establishments under ARTRAC. But had these visits achieved anything, or were the changes only cosmetic? What I realized was that there needed to be continuity. ARTRAC could not become a lay-over before moving to an operational command. To do justice to such a command spread over the whole of India, a full tenure of at least a year and a half was essential. This round-robin shuffling had to stop.

I was no stranger to Kolkata or to the Command HQ situated at Fort William, having been there many times since my days as a Brigadier at Phulbari. Fort William was built between 1758 and 1781 by Robert Clive, after the Battle of Plassey, on the Eastern banks of the Hooghly River. Just inside the main

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entrance off Red Road is a striking War Memorial where, as customary, I laid a wreath after the Guard of Honour, before proceeding to the Main Office building. The Main Office was in an imposing five-storeyed building, which had been under construction for some time. In fact, during my earlier tenure as IGAR(N), the building was still under construction, so it was my first visit to this new complex. After getting to know the officers, including the Chief of Staff, Lt Gen Srivastava of the Artillery, over a cup of tea, it was time to get down to business.

Each Command is unique in its own way and has its own challenges, and Eastcom was no different. The jurisdiction of the command spans nine states with borders with five countries, including the Tibet region of China. The operational AOR extends from the tri-junction between Nepal–Tibet–India in the West to Tibet–India–Myanmar in the East, and then Southwards all along the 1643-km-long Indo–Myanmar border. The border with Bangladesh is the responsibility of the BSF. Sikkim was with 33 Corps, Western Arunachal Pradesh with 4 Corps and Eastern Arunachal with 3 Corps. The Myanmar border adjoining our states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram was manned by the Assam Rifles. This arrangement was as per the government's policy of 'one border—one force'. Thus, the International Border was with the BSF, the LC and LAC with the Army, Tibet (China) with the ITBP, Nepal with the SSB and Myanmar with the AR. In practice though, it was the Army only that was manning the Tibet border, even though the ITBP was co-located. In most places, it was the Army outpost that was in front, especially in the sensitive and disputed areas.

In the evening was the official 'dining-in' party. Just as we were about to leave for the Command Mess, there was an urgent call from the COS and I wondered what flap had happened on

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my very first day in Kolkata. When I took the call, he informed me in a slightly aggrieved tone that his posting had just come in, to proceed to the OTA, Gaya as the Commandant. I gave an incredulous chuckle. On my first day of taking over the Command, my COS was posted out. I had to assure the COS, who was quite upset, that I myself was flabbergasted at this development, of which I had no inkling. Having been a COS myself, I knew how important the role of the COS was. Since the outgoing and incoming Army Commanders do not meet each other, it was the COS who provided the continuity and was the principal adviser. It took me most of the remaining evening to explain to the COS the circumstances under which I had moved, not even having had time to go to the MO Dte for the detailed briefing, let alone anything else. I do not know if he was convinced, but I was certainly surprised at the turn of events and how the top two positions were being turned over nearly simultaneously. As it is, barely had I taken over, than I had to dine out my COS. After that, I remained without a COS for almost six months, severely hampering my functioning, until the post was filled by Lt Gen RP Kalita.[2]

Due to its vast area of operations, the touring was extensive. Moreover, as military aircraft did not have permission to overfly Bangladesh, any routing to Dimapur or Tezpur had to go around through the Siliguri corridor, staying in Indian air space throughout. This almost doubled the time taken to reach either of these Corps HQ locations. Since helicopter flying was restricted to the morning hours, especially in the HAA, it meant one had to reach the previous evening to be able to make an early morning start. Even then, given the vagaries of the weather, there was no guarantee that the scheduled plan would go through fully as planned. There was always a plan A and a plan B. On one occasion, having spent three hours in the air to

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reach Dimapur, the weather the next morning did not permit any helicopter flying at all, so we ended up going by road to Kohima, to visit IGAR(N). The IG, of course, was happy that I was visiting my old home. This also gave me the opportunity to interact with the Governor, Shri PB Acharya, and the Chief Minister, Shri Neiphiu Rio. Whenever I went to Dimapur, I used to meet as many people as possible. I met up with VS Atem of the NSCN(IM) and Khitovi Zhimomi of the NSCN(KK) to seek their views on the prevailing situation in Nagaland and the talks on the Naga Peace Accord, as well as journalists and members of NGOs such as the Naga Mothers' Association. I made notes of all these meetings as they would be useful for my PhD thesis on 'Harmonizing Naga Customs, Traditions and Institutions in the Context of Peace and Development'.

Following the signing of the Framework Agreement in 2015, there were great expectations that a full-fledged Naga Peace Accord (NPA) would soon follow, bringing to an end this long-running insurgency. However, that had not happened, even though elections for the state legislature held in 2018 had been fought on that promise. Following the Framework Agreement, many more stakeholders had been made part of the negotiations, which had irked the NSCN(IM), as they felt that they were the pre-eminent voice of the people. The IM was still holding out on the core issues of a separate Flag and Constitution, which were no-go as far as the Centre was concerned. On the other hand, the NSCN (KN)[3] was more than willing to sign on the dotted line, though they too had some additional demands, which, however, were not insurmountable. However, it was more prudent to have all the stakeholders on board, and so the negotiations were ongoing. The locals I spoke to, my friends from my earlier tenure, were also of the opinion that the contentious issues could be put on the back burner to

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be settled at a later date, but at least get on with it. Though the talks involved all the stakeholders, the notable omission was the Army/AR who would actually be at the forefront of implementing any accord. This hesitation to involve the Army in the negotiations and decision-making process in the overall security architecture of the nation always has been, and remains, a mystery.

Having served in all the Corps of the Command, it was relatively easier for me to re-familiarize myself with the terrain and tasks of the Corps and Divisions. I made it a point to visit those areas I had not been to earlier; Naku La in Sikkim for instance, and Yangste in the Tawang Sector. These were the two areas that used to have regular violent face-offs. While we were in an advantageous position at Yangste, the same was not true for Naku La. During our visits to Naku La in North Sikkim, the Corps Commander, Lt Gen Mohanty, and I, along with the local commanders, would brainstorm ways to become more effective. The bottom line would invariably be for at least two Companies of Infantry to be given from either of the Brigades of 20 Mountain Division at Binaguri. Binaguri was a peace station and I felt it would be unfair to those units to again redeploy in field, that too in HAA. On the other hand, there was a mechanized Infantry Battalion in the forward area of North Sikkim itself, which was not being taken into account. Apparently, the fact that they were Infantry had been lost sight of, or that the ICVs were just another mode of transportation. When I suggested that these Companies that were readily available in situ be utilized, there was some initial hesitation, as if I had suggested something strange. After the idea sank in, the Companies of the mechanized Battalion were utilized sans their ICVs, in a purely Infantry role and they performed splendidly. The men just have to be given an

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opportunity to prove their mettle and they will never let you down.

The other area of note was the Yangste sub-sector in the Kameng District of Arunachal, which had become part of 71 Infantry Division post its raising. This is an area which is critical to the defence of Tawang, though clearly South of the watershed still claimed by China. It is an isolated sub-sector and has to be maintained at full strength to avert any grab action by the PLA. The PLA does resort to some show of force and attempts to breach our forward defensive line, which is resolutely opposed. To press their claims, the strength of these patrols kept increasing, often striking at multiple points simultaneously. This could only be countered by having adequate strength of our own, and these attempts invariably resulted in some sort of scuffle, with the PLA invariably coming out second-best. This would only make them come with even more strength in the next attempt. One of the vulnerabilities of this sub-sector was that it was not connected by road. To induct any additional forces into this area, one had to go by road to Damteng, then by foot all the way up to the Yangtse Top and then forward to whichever location on the LAC needed to be reinforced. From Damteng, which was at an altitude of 10,000 ft, one had to ascend 5000 ft to reach the locations on the LAC, which were at heights ranging from 12,000 to 15,000 ft. In full battle gear and without oxygen, this could take anything between six to eight hours. Efforts at road construction had been underway since 2010 but had not made much headway as the track hit an unsurmountable rock face. That alignment had to be abandoned and a new one planned. Work commenced on this alignment, which could only be carried out in a limited working season. The Border Roads Organisation (BRO), which was entrusted with this task, made slow but steady progress and was finally able to

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break through to the top in 2020. To visit this area by chopper was not easy either. The chopper would land, the passengers would deplane and the chopper would go back to a helipad at a lower altitude. When it was time to leave, the chopper would return and we would embark, with the rotors still running. The weather had to remain clear throughout this period and it was only after two or three attempts that I was able to get through.

It was not Sikkim or Tawang that I was worried about, though. Sikkim was a small state, well defended by a full Corps and with adequate infrastructure and other resources. The same was the case for the Tawang tract of Arunachal stretching from Me La in the West to Tulung La in the East. It was the area beyond, what in Army parlance is called the Rest of Arunachal Pradesh or RALP, that was the more worrisome. Though it is called RALP, in actuality it is the 'most' of Arunachal Pradesh. Of the 1100-plus-km of the border that it shares with Tibet, almost 900 km is with the RALP, defended by only one Corps. The RALP comprises the valleys of the Subansari, Siyom, Siyang, Dibang and Lohit rivers. Each of the valleys is defended by about a Brigade or so and has to be self-contained in all respects, as there is no interconnectivity between the valleys. There are large unheld areas in between, where there is no deployment. The area is kept under watch through long-range patrols (LRP) which are up to fifteen days' duration. The terrain is treacherous, heavily forested with thick undergrowth, quite unlike the terrain in other areas. Several fast-flowing rivulets have to be negotiated either by wading through them or over rickety foot-bridges. By the end of the LRP, its members become stick thin with their uniforms almost in tatters. Even then, these patrols can only look out for tell-tale signs of incursions but cannot prevent them.

When the Raksha Mantri (RM), Mrs Nirmala Sitharaman, visited, I made it a point to take the RM to Anini, an isolated

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location in the Dibang Valley. The RM had spent some time in her early years in this area with the Mishimi tribe, so she too was keen on visiting this area. The visit underscored how little things had changed in the intervening decades and the urgent necessity of making roads to our border areas as well as lateral roads connecting all the valleys. In January 2008, the Trans Arunachal Highway (TAH) project was announced by then Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh, and by 2019, the project was well underway. However, the TAH ran mostly along the foothills of Arunachal and did not really address the issue of lateral connectivity between the valleys in the forward areas. The Centre therefore approved, in 2022, the construction of an Arunachal Frontier Highway in the forward areas running roughly parallel to the watershed.[4] This, more than the 2000-km-long TAH, will give the military a major capability boost. China predictably raised objections to the project while continuing the development of roads unabated, on their side of the LAC.

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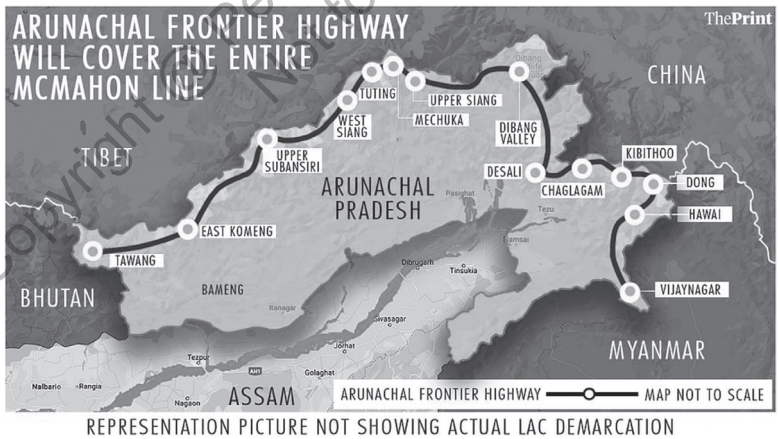

Source: ThePrint, 26 November 2022, https://theprint.in/defence/modi-govt-moves-with-arunachal-frontier-highway-among-indias-toughest-projects-yet-china-in-mind/1232207/.

When I took over Eastcom, I was aware that my schedule would take me from Kolkata at sea level to these HAA and super HAA areas. With my medical history, I felt it would be prudent to undergo a full medical, especially for my abnormal ECG. At the Command Hospital (CH), I was again put through a battery of tests and this time, a name was given to my condition: Apical Hypertrophic Cardio Myopathy (AHCM), a rare medical condition, first discovered in Japan in 1976.[5] The cardiologist at the CH was extremely concerned and suggested various lines of treatment, including installing a pacemaker. The Commandant, Maj Gen Sunil Kant, suggested we take a second opinion from a renowned cardiologist in Kolkata, Dr Rabin Chakravarty of the Medica Super Speciality Clinic, who specializes in heart rhythm disorders. We went to him and presented all the facts and the recommended line of treatment. Dr Rabin made a very telling remark, that in the Army, doctors treat a patient looking at his rank rather than the symptoms. It was a remark that was to stick with me. He clarified that he had seen many such cases in people from all walks of life, and that it is not associated with sudden cardiac death and has a benign prognosis. Since this was a totally different prognosis, we decided to take yet another opinion, this time from AIIMS, Delhi. Here too, Dr Bisoi and Dr Sanjeev, after reviewing all the reports, said that there was nothing to worry about, but that I should avoid any sudden or extreme physical exertion. Basically, the same thing that the cardiologist at MH, Meerut, had told me in 1995, two decades earlier. It has always been my policy to make health a priority and to take medical treatment as appropriate. I used to make this point in my address to the officers not to hide any underlying medical condition and that it was better to be 'a living Major rather than a deceased Major General'; not to conceal medical problems for the sake of promotions.

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In the normal course, Lt Gen Praveen Bakshi, who was the Army Commander Eastern Command should have succeeded Gen Dalbir Singh Suhag as the COAS, in December 2016. If that had happened, then my coursemate, Lt Gen Devraj Anbu, would have been next in line to become the Chief. However, this whole line-up changed when Gen Bipin Rawat was promoted over the heads of Lt Gen Praveen Bakshi and Lt Gen PM Hariz, both of whom retired in due course. Lt Gen Devraj Anbu, also of the SIKH LI, after his stint as the Army Commander, Northern Command, was the VCOAS and due to retire by end-August 2019. Accordingly, it was decided that I should move to Delhi as the Vice-Chief even if it were to be for a short duration. It was time to bid adieu to Kolkata and Eastern Command, having once again spent just about a year in this assignment. With this transfer, I would have moved five times in five years; Delhi–Ambala–Delhi–Shimla–Kolkata–Delhi.

I was due to take over as the VCOAS on 1 September 2019 and we were winding down the establishment in Kolkata when Veena got a call from our neighbour in Pune that her mother had suffered a stroke and had to be rushed to Emergency. Unfortunately, Veena's sister Uma had just gone to Canada for their daughter Ira's admission, so there was no choice but for Veena to rush to Pune. Her mother had been admitted to the Dinanath Mangeshkar Hospital and scans showed that immediate surgery was required. After Veena left, I wound up the house, went through the formalities of the farewell and reached Pune before the scheduled surgery. The surgery was a success, but her mobility had been seriously affected. My mother-in-law had been a fiercely independent lady and seeing her bedridden made us all extremely sad. It was clear that she would not be able to live by herself any more and that we would have to bring her back to Delhi with us.

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When I reflect on my stint with the Eastern Army, what comes foremost to mind is the complexities of the North-east not only in reference to our Northern Adversary but also the hugely intricate issues related to the internal security dynamics of the region. While the diversity of Indian nationhood is a matter of truism and amounts to stating the obvious, what is less spoken about is the fact that it is North-east (NE) India where this manifests to a scale that probably is unparalleled anywhere in the world. Our NE historically has been a melting pot of cultures and ethnicities. Over 500 different ethnic groups, of which around 110 are major, dot the landscape of our North-east Region (NER). Owing to its diverse ethnic sub-nationalism governed by primordial values of 'tribe–land–autonomy', the region got marred by various insurgencies over time. Multiple causative factors that were unique to each insurgency pushed the region into a vicious circle of violence in the immediate wake of Independence, thus disrupting the development and governance. However, one common thread impacting every insurgency has been the nefarious designs of our inimical adversaries as they were quick to exploit opportunities, giving various Indian Insurgent Groups (IIGs) readily available ideological, moral and material support. While the Chinese sowed the seeds with their precepts of communism to begin with and kept giving the necessary drip line and boosters from time to time; extended/thin deployment on the Indo–Bangladesh Border (IBB) was exploited by IIGs and the dispensation in erstwhile East Pakistan and subsequently by the Director General Foreign Intelligence (DGFI) of Bangladesh during the rule of Gen Zia and his daughter. Despite its friendly orientation, Myanmar, on the other hand, owing to its own internal challenges and the engulfing of the Myanmar Army (MA) in combating Ethnic Armed Groups (EAGs),

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has always faced challenges in managing the Indo–Myanmar Border (IMB). This gets compounded due to the prevalent Free Move Regime (FMR), poor/no connectivity towards the IMB from either side, thickly forested hilly terrain and overlapping ethnic spread astride the IMB. This readily available ecosystem has led to the accumulation of various IIGs in distinct clusters astride the IMB on the Myanmar side. Owing to our persistent counter-insurgency operations, the indices of violence in the hinterland on our side had declined to marginal levels. However, the ecosystem of the IIGs in these camps astride the IMB was a worrisome proposition that needed to be addressed on priority, more so with the backdrop of intelligence reports suggesting the attempts of IIGs in forming organizations such as the United National Liberation Front of Western South East Asia (UNLFWSA) and Coordination Committee (CorCom).

It is with this backdrop that the idea of conducting Operation Sunrise was mooted by us to disrupt the prevailing ecosystem of IIGs, an apt name for this iconic operation as it happens to be the insignia of Eastern Command as well. Conducted in two parts in February and May 2019, Operation Sunrise turned out to be a huge success, enabling long-lasting dividends. Besides the large number of physical casualties suffered by the IIGs (around twenty to thirty fatal), the main achievement was actually the success we got in disrupting the IIGs in their comfort zone of well-established camps. This, in turn, rattled the IIG and EAG leadership in equal measure. There were large-scale desertions and fleeing insurgent cadres got trapped by our AR and Army columns on our side of the IMB. Apprehensions of IIGs during the period of Operation Sunrise witnessed an almost 300 per cent surge, with about 150 apprehensions in just seven days. Consequently, many unholy alliances between the groups not only got severed but ideas such as CorCom and UNLFWSA

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got nipped in the bud. It also marked the beginning of the end of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and hugely impacted the standing of the United Liberation Front of Assam (Independent) ULFA (I), which significantly enabled the return of peace in Assam. This operation stands out as a maiden joint operation with the MA after Operation Golden Bird undertaken in 1995 (which incidentally got aborted by the MA due to controversies surrounding the presenting of the Nehru Award for goodwill and friendship to Aung San Suu Kyi). As is the norm, it was preceded by diligent joint planning through some crucial staff visits and interactions between the two sides. To enable the smooth conduct of this operation, the coordination of command, control and communication was immaculately worked out. In fact, we also exchanged Liaison Officers (LOs) who enabled intricate ground coordination.

Talking about LOs, I am reminded of an incident. Late one night while the operation was at its peak, I got a frantic call from my BGS seeking permission to pull back some of our columns placed astride the IMB by at least 2 km. Perplexed by this novel idea, I queried the reason and was promptly told that it was a request from the MA, through our LO. They were about to engage an insurgent camp in close proximity to our troops with artillery or mortar ammunition of Chinese make. They had a bad experience with its accuracy; they were not quite sure where the rounds would land, hence this request as a precautionary measure to avoid any collateral damage. On a serious note, in hindsight, I must acknowledge the unprecedented cooperation and coordination from the MA during this operation. Unlike Operation Golden Bird,[6] Operation Sunrise was much larger in time, space and force matrix on both sides. It witnessed exemplary cooperation between the two armies.

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The external dimension has always played a pivotal role in fuelling and sustaining insurgencies in the North-east. With insurgencies having lost the ideological space and their combative potency reduced to marginal levels today, we are on the cusp of eliminating this menace from the North-east landscape. While significant ground needs to be covered internally in culminating the Naga Peace Process and restoring peace in Manipur, it is sad that the current turmoil in Myanmar and Manipur has again given space to IIGs. In the current milieu, while AR is focused on the IMB, close cooperation between the two sides continues to be the need of the hour. This, therefore, should continue to be the focus of our diplomatic endeavours with Myanmar.

It will be pertinent to mention that while the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) projects are progressing with marginal disruption, mainly due to the unique ability of the Chinese to run with the hare and hunt with the hound; our projects, viz. KMMTP and the India–Myanmar Thailand Trilateral (IMTT) Highway, are lagging. We need to find our own unique solutions in the maze of possibilities. Operation Sunrise is one successful example.

At Delhi, we shifted to the Vice-Chief's residence on Safdarjung Road. Gen Rawat, too, had been in the same house as the Vice-Chief and had taken over on the same day, 1 September, three years earlier in 2016. After a short stint of only four months, he had been promoted to Chief. Was the same fate in store for me?

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Part 4

Four Stars of Destiny

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4.1

Break In

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16 December 2019, Vijay Diwas

I was lying in bed in the morning, going over the day's programme. A dinner that evening was planned with Admiral Karambir Singh, 24th Chief of the Naval Staff (CNS), at Navy House on Rajaji Marg, New Delhi. It was a farewell dinner from his side for General Rawat. I remember thinking to myself that if some announcement were made today, and if well-wishers started coming to our official residence at 25, Safdarjung Road, it might become difficult to get away. As it turned out, the announcement was made only when we were already at Navy House. We were already seated for dinner when Lieutenant Kapil, the Aide-de-Camp to the CNS, came up to me, saying that my Military Assistant (MA), Brig Vikrant Naik, wanted to speak to me. Since I was not carrying my mobile, Vikrant had to call the Flags, as the aides are called in the Navy. I went in to take the call, and that's when Vikrant conveyed the news that I had, in fact, been appointed as the next Army Chief. He also put me through to the Private Secretary to

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the Raksha Mantri, Shri Kundan Kumar, who in turn put me through to the Honourable RM, Shri Rajnath Singh. The RM was at the airport and to depart shortly for the US. However, he very graciously took my call and conveyed his congratulations and best wishes.

By the time I returned to the dining area, the news had already been received by everyone present. It was breaking news on every mobile. Apparently, I was the only one not carrying a mobile that day! General Rawat was the first to congratulate me, followed by the other two Chiefs, Admiral Karambir (KB as he was affectionately called), my childhood friend, and Air Chief Marshal RKS Bhadauria (RK), my squadron type from Lima Squadron. KB's mother, Raji Aunty, whom I had known since our Devlali days, and who was staying with KB at the time, also came out to congratulate me. She gave me a warm hug and said, 'I wish Sudha (my mother) had been here to see this day.' I hugged her back, and it was as if I was hugging my own mother.

We returned home to a deluge of calls. Isha and Amala, too, had been receiving congratulatory messages but in the absence of any confirmation from us, did not know how to respond. In fact, I had spoken to Isha just before leaving for dinner and had not said anything, so she was the most puzzled. News does indeed travel fast. My ADC, Capt Taran, had, in the meanwhile, arranged for an impromptu celebration. The Officers on my personal staff—Vikrant, Rakesh, Aneel, along with their wives, Madhavi, Naina and Shruti—all came trooping in to wish us. We popped another bottle of champagne, the third of the evening, and we all breathed a sigh of relief.

Veena fondly remembers that night. Our parents were asleep so we did not wake them up. She called her sister Uma and Isha; they had already received calls from well-wishers but

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were waiting for confirmation. We decided to tell Amala in the morning, as it would have been the wee hours of the night in Singapore. The news had been in the pipeline for so long that it didn't seem that big a surprise when it actually happened. We were inundated with calls and congratulatory messages. People seemed genuinely pleased to have us (at the helm). Significant among the calls was one from Kalpana, Gen Ranbir Singh's wife, as Gen Ranbir was also in the running for the same position. I spoke to our old buddy Hav Gurnam. He had done a lot for us during the years that the girls were growing up. So also Harjit (another buddy, retired) who was pleased to hear the news. It was particularly gratifying to receive messages from younger officers and their wives, who had been with us at Ambala, Delhi, Shimla and Kolkata, as well as various tenures before that.

Amala was in Singapore and came to know only the next morning.

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In Amala's words:

My phone alarm jolted me awake. Bleary-eyed, I turned to switch it off. It was 6.45 a.m. Singapore time. Twenty-five WhatsApp messages and three missed calls. What?! I shot up in bed, all sleep forgotten. Had something bad happened? Thankfully, it was happy news. It turned out that my dad had been confirmed as the twenty-eighth Chief of Army Staff the previous night. As Singapore is a few hours ahead of India, I was already in bed and fast asleep before the news could reach me. In the days that followed, I was astounded at the number of people who came up to me to congratulate me and our family on the news. Living in Singapore, I assumed that not many people in my circle would follow the news closely enough or understand its enormity. But I was mistaken. I was heartened

at the way relative strangers came up to me to share how highly they thought of my father. Unfortunately, I was unable to visit India on the day my father officially took over as the Chief, but I remained glued to the news the entire day.

This final job assignment gave me the opportunity to see my father in a new light—as a leader, an academic, a trusted adviser and a national icon in a high-stakes world. However, what I am most grateful for are the things that remained the same: hard work, humility and family.

Isha's musings . . .

2019 has ended and 2020 has begun. If I had to describe all the emotions I have been feeling these past few weeks, from disbelief to pride and happiness, it would need a whole book. Excitement and thankfulness on the day the baton was handed over and when we witnessed the Guard of Honour. We have been on a see-saw ever since General Rawat was selected as the COAS in December 2016. That brought Popsi (what we call my father) into the running for the next COAS, on General Rawat's superannuation, and we have been dealing with casual, throwaway comments for a couple of years. In my case, 16 December was almost an anticlimax. I had a long conversation with Mommy and Popsi around 7 p.m. about routine happenings, after which they went off to dinner with the CNS. I had planned to write report cards after dinner. After dinner, Simon and I happened to pick up our phones at about the same time and saw a WhatsApp message from our Principal, 'Congratulations . . . just saw the news' and my reply was, 'News?' Simon too had received a similar message. At this point, I started searching for news on Google but nothing was coming up. Then, more messages started trickling in and

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finally a phone call from Hardeep Bhaiya, Dad's buddy, which made me believe it all. In all this activity, report-writing was forgotten, and we had a hectic day later in the week to meet the deadline. 31 December was the day Popsi officially took over with the handing over of the Command Baton marking the occasion. The ceremony itself is very low-key with not much pomp and splendour attached to it. We were all there; Mom, me, Simon, Sonutai, Mukund Daddy, and Dad's first CO, Brig Madan Das, as well as the first 2iC, Brig JS Kanwar. In all this excitement, I sorely missed Amala. Life has not materially changed for us. The real challenge lies ahead—how to snatch moments of quality time with each other.

Life though, did change for all of us, right from being put in the Z+ protected category. There was no personal life or impromptu programmes any more. All events had to be planned well in advance. Just 'dropping in' at a friend's place for dinner was out of the question. Any location that had to be visited had to be sanitized in advance by a bomb detection or dog squad. We had police escorts to the front and rear, plus a close protection group drawn from the elite Special Forces of the Army. The ADC (Security), Maj Bhojpal Shakya, had his hands full coordinating each move and event like a master choreographer. We also became mini-celebrities, with everyone wanting to take selfies with us. We instantly began to sympathize and identify with celebrities who are hounded by paparazzi. I remember that on one occasion, it was a wedding, and the photographer kept following us around, clicking away merrily. Finally, Veena had to intervene and tell him to go take snaps of the bride and groom, whose wedding it was. As Vice-Chief, I had seen this happening with General and Mrs Rawat, but experiencing this kind of attention first-hand was

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altogether a novel and frightening affair. Equally unnerving was the close media scrutiny. Each and every word spoken or written had to be absolutely non-controversial and not open to misunderstanding or misreporting. Gen Rawat had, on occasion, made off-the-cuff remarks or had been misquoted, leading to much debate, and I was acutely aware of this fact. Preparing for a press conference was like running the gauntlet.

My first interaction with the media was on 1 January 2020 itself, immediately after reviewing the Guard of Honour on the lawns of the South Block. In my opening, I greeted everyone by saying, '*Aap sab ko Sat Sri Akal*,' and continued by saying, '*Waheguru ki kripa se main Army Chief niyukt hua hoon*' (it is by the grace of God that I have been appointed as the Army Chief). This immediately caught the attention of the media and Army watchers, including veterans. It got a very positive response with many commenting that it highlighted the secular credentials of the Army.[1] I had said it spontaneously, what came naturally to me. It's the first thing I hear in the morning when my buddy wakes me up for PT, and I would have said it dozens of times each day, right from the day I got Commissioned in the Sikh Light Infantry. I don't remember much else of what I said. I was quite nervous, facing a battery of cameras and microphones and going 'live' nationally for the first time. It is not something that Officers are trained for; we are not media-savvy and that does tend to get us into hot water, as it did to me on a number of occasions.

Traditionally, the Chief and his spouse visit the Army Hospital (R&R) and the Base Hospital on New Year's Day and gift the patients some sweets or fruits. 1 January was my first day in office and full of ceremonial and other official events. However, we did not want to break with tradition and managed to squeeze in visits to both hospitals. One of the patients at the Base Hospital was none other than General JJ Singh, our

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former COAS, who had undergone a major surgery a few days earlier. He was quite unwell and still recuperating. When he came to know that we were to visit, he made it a point to freshen up and get dressed. When we entered his room, not heeding my protestations, he stood up and saluted, saying that when the Chief comes, you have to stand to attention. I was deeply touched and at the same time proud of the strong traditions that we have. Later, Anupama Singh, his wife, told us that it was the first time that he had got out of bed since the operation and that our visit had invigorated him and put him on the road to recovery. If the visit of the Chief can have such a positive effect on a former Chief, I can only hope that it had a similar effect on the other patients. Incidentally, Anupama Singh's father was also posted at the Embassy in France, at about the same time that we were there; she and my sister were great friends, and she remembers my brother and me as the annoying young kids who would always be troubling them.

January is a busy month, full of ceremonial events. There is the Army Day, followed by the Republic Day Parade at Kartavya Path (Raj Path) and the Beating Retreat Ceremony at Vijay Chowk. There is also Martyrs' Day in remembrance of Mahatma Gandhi at his Samadhi at Raj Ghat. Assuming office in January had its own challenges, which included getting to grips with the job while at the same time, monitoring these ceremonial events, in which the Army has a major role to play. But first, I decided to address the Principal Staff Officers and the key appointments posted in the Integrated HQ of the MoD (Army) or more colloquially, the Army HQ. I felt that they should hear their Chief first-hand and get to know me, and through them, I hoped that my message would percolate down to the rank and file. The key point I made, through my experience in command of 2 RR (SIKH LI), was that I was the

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Chief, not of my Regiment or of the Infantry but of the entire Indian Army. That each and every Arm and Service had an important role to play and that there would be no favouritism or parochialism—no 'lanyard culture'—as it is known, i.e. favouring persons from your own Regiment or region. Everyone would be judged solely on merit and professional contribution. I tried to impress upon all to concentrate more on 'Substance' than 'Style', to cut out the bullshit, frills and other excesses like the gifting culture and bouquets at airports/helipads. These were issues that were close to my heart and which I had been implementing in my zone of influence right from my Brigade Commander days. I also recapped the more common and long-standing issues, such as zero tolerance towards corruption and human rights violations. Lastly, I reiterated that we are all, from top to bottom, General to jawan, ambassadors of the Army and that our conduct should be above reproach. From the feedback that I received, the talk was much appreciated, especially the part about the 'no lanyard' culture, and now the onus was on me to walk the talk.

My first outstation visit was to Leh, the HQ of 14 Corps. Little was I to know then, of what was in store and that Leh would be the place I would visit the most in my tenure as Chief. I landed in Leh on 9 January 2020, and after a quick medical check-up at Timmy Hut, a small waiting area just outside the airport, I transferred to Advanced Light Helicopters (ALH) or choppers, for an aerial reconnaissance of the Siachen Glacier. We flew along the glacier, seeing the off-take points towards the Saltoro Ridge to the West on the route out, and the possible routes towards Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO) in Eastern Ladakh on the route in, landing at Kumar Post for a briefing and tea with the troops stationed there. Even with all the special clothing, we were chilled to the bone. The temperature at Kumar Post must

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have been minus 15 degrees Celsius or so at about 1000 hours, but that was nothing compared to Bana Post, which had recorded a temperature of minus 47 degrees the previous night. After that, it was back to the Corps HQ for a formal briefing. I had planned to visit the other areas of Eastern Ladakh over the next two days, but that was not to be, as I was urgently recalled to the Capital due to a sudden requirement to go to Bhutan.

Ever since the Doklam stand-off, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) had been trying to construct a road coming South towards the Jampheri Ridge, in order to stake their claim to the area, disputed with Bhutan. Their earlier attempt along a shorter route closer to the International Border to the West was under observation by our own troops from our side of the border. The moment the PLA tried to alter the status quo, we had physically blocked the way leading to a seventy-three-day stand-off, before the PLA pulled back and gave up.[2] Instead, they commenced work on a road further to the East along the valley of the Amo Chu, which was not under our direct observation. We, of course, knew of this development through other sources, including satellite imagery. The latest inputs showed that they had now reached just short of Pt 1621, the junction between the Torsa Nala and the Amo Chu.[3] Any move further South would have grave and adverse security implications for India, as Bhutan lies just North of the strategically important Siliguri Corridor. It was felt that these developments should be shared with the Royal Government of Bhutan, in person to convey its gravity.

Accordingly, an under-the-radar visit was planned, with the delegation led by me and comprising Shri Vijay Gokhale, the Foreign Secretary, and Shri Samant Goel, Secretary Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW). All of us rushed off to Thimphu on 10 January and on arrival, after conferring

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with Smt Ruchira Kamboj, our Ambassador in Bhutan, and Maj Gen JB Chaudhary,[4] Commandant, IMTRAT, called on both His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the Fourth King of Bhutan (K4) and His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, the Fifth King of Bhutan (K5). We conveyed the absolute necessity of containing the PLA to the North of the Nala Junction and of increasing the RBA strength on the Jampheri Ridge. We also proposed that if nothing else, the RBA Check-Post (CP) at Khajathang should at least be converted into a Joint CP by moving some of the IMTRAT personnel up from the Joint CP at Duktengang, which was just South of the Jampheri Ridge. K4 listened to us patiently and graciously and though he felt we should not take any major steps in view of impending border talks, His Majesty nevertheless saw the merit in our recommendations and agreed to the establishment of a Joint CP at Khajathang.

Calling on various dignitaries as per protocol also took up much of my time in the first two weeks. I called on, in turn, Shri Ram Nath Kovind, Honourable President; Shri Venkaiah Naidu, Honourable Vice-President; Shri Narendra Modi, Honourable Prime Minister; Shri Amit Shah, Honourable Home Minister and Shri Om Birla, Honourable Speaker of the Lok Sabha, among others. Although I had met or briefly interacted with them as part of larger events, it was the first time I was meeting them on a one-to-one basis. All were very gracious and wished me a successful tenure. The President spent a lot of time asking me the correct pronunciation of 'Naravane'. This has always been a bugbear as my name has mostly been mispronounced, often as Narwana, which is a small town in the Jind district of Haryana. I have always felt that when a person makes the effort to learn your name and its correct pronunciation, it shows how much one cares and is

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in itself a mark of respect. The PM was equally gracious and made me feel at ease right from the beginning. At dinner later, which Veena could unfortunately not attend, one of the things he mentioned was the importance of conserving resources, including electricity. He pointed out that even in his own office, only those lights were kept on which were absolutely essential and not all over. That immediately struck a chord with me since it was one of the things I had been insisting upon, without much success, from my time as Army Commander ARTRAC. I resolved then and there to persist with my efforts as, after all, I even had the endorsement of the PM himself.

Before we knew it, Army Day was upon us, including a press conference prior to Army Day itself, the Army Day Parade and the At Home, a reception hosted on the lawns of the Army House. The press conference is a gauntlet that has to be run, full of surprises and scope for either getting ambushed or making gaffes of your own. As my first 'presser', to be held in the Manekshaw Centre, it was quite stressful preparing for it. In a departure from the past, I decided to make a short opening statement, which I felt would set the tone not only for the presser but for my tenure and my vision of the future. I gave out seven key facets (ABC-IT-PQ) namely:

Allegiance. To the Constitution of India, to dispel the feeling that the Army was being politicized.

Belief. In ourselves, the organization and the country. Faith in superiors and subordinates alike.

Consolidation. To build upon our legacy and not to undertake change for the sake of change.

Integration. Both within the Army and between the Services.

Training. To cater for integration and enhance operational efficiency.

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Personnel. Importance of the man behind the machine, as well as our veterans.
Quality. To stress on quality rather than quantity, especially in procurements.

The presser went off well, and subsequent reporting was quick to pick up on the nuances of my remarks on Allegiance to the Constitution of India. Veterans too were happy since they believed they were no longer being ignored. I had kept this close to my chest and even my Staff Officers were unaware of what I was going to say. The Army Day Parade was executed flawlessly. As the former GOC of Delhi Area, I quite knew what to expect. The At Home was an event by itself with over 400 guests, ranging from diplomats to service attachés, serving and retired officers from the three Services as well as CAPFs and journalists of all hues. For the first time after a long gap, both the President and the Prime Minister graced the occasion, along with Shri Rajnath Singh, the RM, and Shri Shripad Yesso Naik, the RRM. Dr Manmohan Singh and Ghulam Nabi Azad from the Opposition, Shri SA Bobde, Chief Justice of India, Shri Ajit Doval, NSA and, of course, Gen Bipin Rawat, the CDS, and Air Chief Marshal RKS Bhadauria, the CAS. Veena and I were there to receive all the guests. As soon as the PM alighted, he remarked jokingly to Veena, '*Aap mere ghar daawat par nahin aye*' (You didn't come to my residence for dinner). We were both quite taken aback that he had remembered such a small incident and promised that next time we would both be there. As part of this event, it is customary to screen a short documentary highlighting the past year's achievements. This too we did differently by preparing a short cameo, with the theme 'Indian Army—Invisible but Everywhere'. It had no narration, just stunning visuals of Army operations in different terrains.

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The video too created waves, and full credit goes to the team of ADG PI, then Maj Gen DP Pandey, and the Asgaonkars, Prabhu and Manika, a husband-and-wife team of Sparkleworks Films, who translated our concept into reality.[5]

Visiting numerous units and formations, listening to their operational briefings and attending the war games (WG) of the various Corps is a major and important function. One of the first WGs that I attended was of the 16 Corps based at Nagrota, near Jammu. The setting was in the context of a Dynamic Response to a terrorist incident as happened after Pulwama (incident) and Balakot (response). This was the first time we were playing out such a scenario. During the WG, the situation played out in an escalatory manner, culminating in a conventional full-fledged war. That is not quite how I viewed it. In my scheme of things, each possible incident should have a proportionate and matching response limited to that provocation. The level and manner of the response would depend on the intensity of the incident, and to that end, we should have a number of plans, prepared and rehearsed, that can be put into effect within hours of any untoward incident. This punitive, retaliatory action had to be immediate to send the correct message. Over the next few months and with other Corps WGs, we further refined this thought process and prepared outline plans, which could be presented to the CCS at a moment's notice, as and when the need arose. Thankfully, such an eventuality did not arise. Two aspects that emerged in most of our WGs though, is that we tend to play out the situations in isolation with little regard to the bigger picture. The situation in other Commands/fronts, what the other Services are doing, developments in the national, international arena, etc., are ignored and we willy-nilly revert to our comfort zone—conventional operations and force-on-force application of combat power. There is no guile or cunning. The

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operations rooms are full of quotes by Sun Tzu and Kautilya, advocating surprise and deception and how to win wars without actually fighting one, but sadly there is none of that to be seen when it comes to actual plans, which are routine, obvious and unlikely to prevail in the face of actual combat.

After about six weeks in the chair, and having taken stock, I felt I should brief the PM on the way ahead and plans for the future. Modernization, of course, is always at the top of the agenda, but along with modernization, I felt that we should transition from a manpower-intensive to a technologically oriented Army. We already had a Short Service Commission (SSC) Scheme in the Army for entry at the officer level. I felt that a similar scheme, a Short Service Enrolment (SSE) Scheme could be introduced at the soldier level to be known as Tour of Duty. Jawans enrolled under this scheme would serve for three to four years with a reduced training period. On release, they would be absorbed by the industry or other services that would benefit from trained and disciplined manpower. A certain percentage who had done well could be retained for yet another 'Tour'. When I explained the broad contours of this to the PM, he appeared interested and asked me what numbers I was looking at. I had replied that initially, we could look at about 10 per cent of any given year's enrolment, which would translate to about 6000 to 7000 SSE recruits each year. It could start as a pilot project and based on the acceptability of the scheme, the numbers could be increased year on year, to a maximum of about 50 per cent. This was exclusively for the Army and was an idea that had occurred to me in late 2019/early 2020 based on my interactions with students and industry doyens.[6] Shri Anand Mahindra of Mahindra and Mahindra was particularly supportive of the scheme.[7] This was the start of what was finally to become the Agnipath Scheme.

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While all this was going on, Covid was already rearing its head. There had been increasing reports in the media of cases surfacing all across the globe. My younger daughter, Amala, had come to India and was due to return to Singapore in the first week of February 2020. The evening before her departure, I got her a dozen N-95 face masks, as there were already reports of a shortage of masks in Singapore. A dozen masks, I thought, would see her through for about a month, by which time this scare would have passed, like the SARS epidemic of 2003. That was certainly wishful thinking on my part. In fact, my first foreign visit to Israel at the end of February had to be cancelled because the Israeli Defence Minister had contracted Covid. As a result of these developments, we had already started passing certain advisories to the regional Commands to put in place precautionary measures as early as end-February. Worldwide, people had stopped shaking hands and were instead greeting each other with the traditional Namaste. Against this backdrop, we named the fight against Covid 'Operation Namaste'.[8] Right from the outset, the Army was at the forefront of the nation's battle against Covid, whether establishing quarantine camps or providing healthcare facilities. In fact, the first set of quarantine camps at Manesar and Chhawa were set up jointly by the Army and ITBP.

My primary concern, though, was 'Force Protection'. While establishing quarantine camps and looking after the needs of the general population was necessary, I could not allow my own Army to become 'unfit for war'. The first and foremost priority, therefore, was to ensure that units remained battleworthy. We had to continue manning our borders and carrying out our CI/CT tasks, irrespective of the circumstances. Moreover, I was apprehensive that should there be a breakdown in law and order leading to rioting or arson, it would fall upon the Army

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in Aid to Civil Authority to restore the situation. Schools and colleges can be closed but essential services have to continue to function, for which we would be the last resort. As it transpired, our efforts at force protection paid off, not as envisaged, but in being able to respond to the crisis in Eastern Ladakh. It is only because we were battleworthy that we could rapidly mobilize units when the need arose, since steps such as screening of troops, restricting leave, placing local markets out of bounds, etc., had already been instituted.

At about the same time, the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS) organized an international webinar, 'Pragyan Conclave', with the theme of 'Contours of Future Wars and Counter Measures'. Covid was rearing its head and many of the international speakers had to cancel at the last minute. During my talk, I brought out that, 'We are witnessing conflicts increasingly transcending time, space and force dimensions, and enveloping new frontiers.' I spoke about how technology is driving doctrine and that the mainstays of the twentieth-century battlefield, the main battle tanks, large surface ships and manned aircraft, might become irrelevant. This immediately created a furore as it hit at the very fundamental level—the '*raison d'être*' of the Services. I brought out that we could be modern, yet irrelevant at the same time in the face of changing threat perceptions.[9] Christine Fair, an American political scientist and noted author, had also attended and I had an opportunity to interact with her a couple of days later, in the Chief's Lounge at South Block. It was supposed to be a courtesy call, but like a true journalist, she asked some very searching questions with respect to our defence preparedness and multiplicity of equipment in our stocks, which did set me thinking about our large inventories and long supply chains. I clarified that this was because of our imports from multiple countries and the L1

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(lowest bidder) system of tendering, and that the only way out of this quagmire was through indigenization.

On 6 May 2020, I went to the Prime Minister's residence yet again, my third visit in five months. I entered the conference hall and laid out the briefing folders at each seat. As the attendees started walking in one by one—Cabinet and Foreign Secretary, CDS, NSA, Ministers of Defence, Home and External Affairs—my mind flashed back to the Staff College Course where we had had a class on Higher Defence Organization and what constituted the Cabinet Committee on Security. As they came in and took their seats awaiting the arrival of the PM, it suddenly struck me that this was the very CCS I had studied almost three decades ago, never imagining that one day, I would be part of that august body. I would brief the CCS numerous times, though the last meeting that I attended in March 2022 was not so pleasant.

The agenda that day was about Doklam, where more developments had taken place that needed urgent attention. However, before that, I brought to everyone's attention an emerging situation in Eastern Ladakh, particularly in the Area of Patrolling Point 14 (PP-14) in the Galwan Valley. A day earlier, on 5 May, there had been a tense face-off between the PLA and our troops at PP-14.[10] It is providential that we had detected this move as the Army Commander, Lt Gen YK Joshi, accompanied by the Corps Commander, Lt Gen Harinder Singh, had been on an aerial reconnaissance mission and had spotted this surreptitious build-up. Suitably alerted, we had mobilized our forces, resulting in the face-off that continued throughout the night, with lots of jostling and fisticuffs. There were no major injuries to either side, and it was at par with similar face-offs in other areas. Since the NSA, Shri Ajit Doval, was to speak to his counterpart (as

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Special Representative), Mr Wang Yi, over the Doklam issue, I suggested that this latest provocation at PP-14 could also be brought up. However, at that point in time, the situation emerging in Doklam was the graver, and the face-off at PP-14 was a mere blip on the radar screen. Little could we have imagined then how this nondescript PP in the Galwan Valley would galvanize an entire nation.

Back to Doklam. I had carried folders containing maps and sketches of the area. Using these, I carried out a review of the situation, culminating with the fact that a stated 'Red Line' had been breached. Since this had been part of my brief as Army Commander, Eastern Command, I could quickly and simply state the developments and their implications. It was evident to all that since this area lay within Bhutan, we had to follow it up with the Royal Government of Bhutan, particularly with His Majesty, K4. This had been precisely one of the scenarios that had been discussed during our meeting in January. As part of the deliberations, I suggested that we could carry out some joint training on the Southern slopes of the Jampheri Ridge so that we would always have some troops at hand for a rapid response. The Foreign Minister opined that while it was a good idea, the proposed area fell within the area disputed between Bhutan and China and that such moves could be seen as provocative. I reiterated that we had been doing joint training in this very area till the late 1980s. At the end of the deliberations, it was felt that as a first step, we could recommend to the RBA to lodge a formal protest with the PLA.

The next morning, it being a holiday, I was having a leisurely breakfast when the Foreign Minister called. He informed me that on returning to his office, he had rechecked the records and that, in fact, the area I had suggested for the joint training was not disputed. I thought that it was very honourable of him

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to have taken the trouble, not only to verify the correct status but also to have given me a call. When all of us are on the same page, it is that much easier to formulate the proper response.

But Covid or no Covid, work has to go on. In the Army, we have to achieve our tasks despite the obstacles in between, be it minefields or barbed wire. Covid was just another obstacle that had to be overcome in the accomplishment of the task. While the rest of the country was going into lockdown and working from home mode, I felt that this would not do for me as the Chief or, for that matter, for other Commanders on the ground. We have been groomed to lead from the front, to be with our men at the time and place where it matters most. The Army Chief couldn't be sequestered in his office but had to be seen in order to instil confidence in the rank and file. Accordingly, I continued with my visits to units and formations in field areas as well as peace stations. The only restriction I placed was that there would be no large gatherings, particularly evening parties. Even my address to the troops was carried out in open spaces with adequate social distancing.

I had served mostly in Northern and Eastern Commands, that too in field areas. Hence, I felt that rather than covering the same old ground, I should instead familiarize myself with those areas I had not been to earlier or visited only many years earlier. I started in the Area of Responsibility of Southern Command, South to North, from Sir Creek along the Rann of Kutch and then into Rajasthan, with halts at Bhuj, Koteswar, Munabao, Jaisalmer and Tanot. Over a period of two days, I listened to the briefings of the Commanding Officers and Brigade Commanders at their actual operational locations and not on some sand model well in the rear, and also interacted with the troops over tea with shakarparas and mathhari—no fancy cookies or pastries. At Koteswar, there were also detachments

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of the BSF and ICG, and I took the opportunity to familiarize myself with their roles and tasks. I also took a ride in an Air Cushion Vehicle aka Hovercraft.

The Captain of the hovercraft was of the rank of Cdr (Lt Col), and his number 2-cum-XO equivalent was a woman officer of the rank of Lt Cdr (Maj). While the Captain was piloting the craft, it was the XO who was passing all the orders to the crew. There were just no issues with respect to the men taking orders from a woman and of just one woman in a boatload of men. Moreover, she was the only woman officer at this most isolated of locations. I have yet failed to understand why in the Army we make such a fuss about such issues, forcing the courts to intervene. Are we still too feudal and paternal? We have to change with the times, otherwise, change will be forced upon us, and that is exactly what happened with respect to granting permanent commission to women officers.

Tanot was a trip down memory lane as I had last been here as a 2/Lt, when the unit was at Bikaner and the Bn Node at Tanot was our responsibility. Of course, a lot had changed—Tanot itself from a nondescript man-and-a-camel village to a bustling township. The dunes were the same, maybe a bit more scrub and sprinkling of kikar trees but it brought back fond memories. I did note, though, that the extent of the Node seemed to have grown from what I could remember. There is always a tendency to go for (occupy) the next dune and the next and the next, and before one realizes it, Companies and Platoons get overstretched, leaving wide gaps in between that are covered neither by observation nor fire, allowing the enemy to exploit these gaps and attack each locality piecemeal, since they are not in mutual support of each other. Lessons learnt over forty years ago were still fresh in my mind. Perhaps too, there was a need to review our plans and base the defences not

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on the dunes but on the built-up area instead, which has more defence potential.

It was then time for a visit to 15 Corps at Srinagar, where Lt Gen BS Raju had just taken over the Corps from Lt Gen KJS (Tiny) Dhillon, who was as different from his predecessor as chalk and cheese. I had wanted to visit the location of 8 JAT/268 Infantry Brigade in the Kupwara Sector, but the weather played spoilsport. It was near this location that we had lost five Para (SF) boys in an encounter, although they did manage to eliminate four terrorists themselves in Operation Rangdori Baikh.[11] It was just sheer bad luck that while closing in on the terrorists, a snow cornice gave way and the team went tumbling down right into the terrorist hideout, wherein a fierce firefight ensued. One of the Commandos, who luckily was still on top, managed to give some fire support and engage the terrorists. Sep Sonam Tshering, a young soldier, kept his wits and took cover behind a solitary tree, which was so slender that his rucksack and sleeping bag were riddled with bullets. This twenty-five-year-old with six years of service displayed true grit and determination, for which he was awarded the Shaurya Chakra.[12] In all my visits, I endeavoured to meet locals from all walks of life to get a feel of the place and people. I also looked up some of my acquaintances from my 2 RR days, Irfan and Adnan, whose father, Majid Bhat, had been a renowned politician. Most of the people we met were passionate nationalists, wanting to bring about positive change in Kashmir. They were almost unanimously of the view that most of the then crop of politicians and bureaucrats were totally corrupt and were thriving on narco-terrorism. On the new party that had just been launched—Apna Party—they said it was just old wine in a new bottle. It did make me pause and wonder whether such candid feedback is taken note of by the powers that be.

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The first week of May 2020 witnessed a few tense face-offs with the PLA. There had already been a face-off at PP-14 on 5 May, and a few days later on the North Bank of the Pangong Tso (Lake). These had seen some jostling, fisticuffs and even stone-throwing, resulting in minor injuries to both sides. At about the same time, there had been a face-off in Sikkim in the area of Naku La (Pass). All of these were the result of aggressive behaviour on the part of the PLA, which seemed to be looking for a fight. Till now, the moves were following the general pattern of resumption of patrolling activities with the onset of summer. Several PLA Brigade and Division equivalent formations had also been reported in their traditional training areas well to the rear. Our formations too were gearing up to induct into their training areas from their peacetime locations in the plains of Northern India. In this, the PLA had an advantage in that the Tibetan Plateau becomes negotiable earlier post-winter, as compared to our side, wherein movement is along treacherous and winding, avalanche-prone roads with high snow-bound mountain passes to be negotiated. As far as mobilization and movement time is concerned, the terrain definitely is in favour of the Chinese.

In the third week of May, in an extremely unusual move, the PLA established their presence in the Area of PP-15 and PP-17A in considerable numbers, with fifteen to twenty Armoured Personnel Carriers (APC), heavy vehicles, including dozers, and troops in the hundreds. These were areas where both sides used to patrol, observe for any untoward activity for a few hours and then fall back to their permanent bases; to Galwan in the case of the PLA and to Karan Singh (KS) Hill in our case. This area (Gogra/Hot Springs) had never been contested in the past. This sudden escalation was unprecedented as well as unwarranted. Reserve Companies and Battalions were moved

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forward and they occupied hitherto unoccupied heights along the Tsogtsalu to maintain parity of forces, and to contain the PLA. The strength at KS Hill was also beefed up. While the Infantry had no problems moving up, the mechanized column faced some difficulties due to a lack of proper surface connectivity.

The situation on the North Bank of the Pangong Tso was slightly different. Pangong Lake, situated at a height of almost 4350 m, is the world's highest saltwater lake. Its waters, which seem to be dyed in blue, stand in stark contrast to the arid mountains surrounding it. Extending to almost 160 km, one-third of the Pangong Lake lies in India and the other two-thirds in Tibet.[13] From the mountains surrounding it, particularly to the North, are a number of ridges that slope gradually towards the lake. These spurs, or fingers as they are more commonly called, are numbered from 1 through 8 starting from the Indian side. Thus Finger 1, Finger 2 and so on to Finger 8. This is one of the areas where there exists a difference in perception as to where the LAC runs since it has never been delineated nor demarcated. It is thus a kind of 'No Man's Land'—while we, the Indian Army (IA) would patrol up to Finger 8, the PLA would do so up to Finger 4, with either side contesting this activity and lodging protests at the appropriate level. At times, this too would result in the proverbial face-off and resultant jostling and pushing.

This was quite a routine activity, and the same was the case on 18/19 May when the patrols faced off, somewhere between Finger 4 and Finger 8. While the prescribed drill was being observed by the IA as per protocols, to defuse the situation, a large column of vehicles suddenly appeared from the direction of Sirijap Fort, past Finger 8 and up to the face of the site, disgorging not the usual Border Defence Regiment troops (akin

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to our BSF or ITBP) but regular PLA troops in full combat gear. They had come fully kitted out with riot shields, batons, barbed-wire studded clubs and pyrotechnics. In the face of this sudden wave of PLA troops, our jawans were outnumbered and though they resisted bravely, were slowly pushed back to the West of Finger 4. This whole activity was once again in gross violation of all laid-down protocols and agreements on confidence-building measures. The PLA occupied the lower reaches of Finger 4, effectively precluding any more patrolling on our part to its East. To sustain themselves and for administrative purposes, the PLA constructed some shelters at various points along the North Bank of the Pangong Tso, including an outline map of China in the vicinity of Finger 6, large enough to be seen by air.

This obviously created a stir in the politico-military establishment. As mentioned earlier, the NSA had spoken to his counterpart earlier in the month over the Doklam issue. In that interaction, they had reiterated the need to maintain peace and tranquillity, and adherence to protocols, including non-use of force or weapons. The PLA's actions were a total departure from what had been discussed. Either the PLA was acting in isolation, which is hard to believe, given the autocratic nature of their systems, or the Chinese were insincere in their talks. We knew that there was a greater than normal presence of troops in the general area of Sirijap, the 'capability'; but were unable to gauge the true 'intention' in a timely manner, due to a lack of adequate Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) capability at the tactical level. Were we surprised at the strategic level? The answer is a resounding No. Did we get surprised at the ground level? Yes, but that is something which is bound to happen with whoever seizes the initiative—the first-mover advantage, like playing with the white pieces in a game of chess.

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Did we lose any territory? That is a moot point, in the absence of any demarcated boundary.

Nevertheless, I was getting quite perturbed by these almost daily reports of face-offs, mostly turning violent, particularly the one of 18/19 May, which had not only resulted in some injuries but also the loss of controlled stores, damage of radio sets and so on. I forthwith decided to make an unscheduled visit to Leh to meet the Commanders on ground and get a feel of the situation. The visit did not leave me with a favourable impression. The Commanders were trying to reason why they had been underprepared. Once is fine, but to be underprepared on the second and subsequent occasions was just not acceptable. It seemed to me that there was a lack of information-sharing within the formation and attempts to underplay the situation. I made it clear in no uncertain terms that if the PLA were not following protocols, neither would we, and that I would not accept a repeat of such incidents.

At Delhi, a flurry of CCS meetings preceded by China Study Group (CSG) meetings followed. The CSG is an informal group steered by the MEA, comprising the Foreign and Defence Ministers, NSA, CDS, Army Chief, Secretaries of the Foreign, Defence and Home Ministries, Secretary R&AW, Director General ITBP and others as required.[14] It is the CSG that, over the years, had been discussing and formulating our long-term strategy with China, including aspects such as patrolling policy, creation of infrastructure, prioritization of road construction, etc. The general sentiment was that we too had to do 'something'. But 'something' doesn't happen overnight. The way that the PLA and the PLAAF had built up clearly showed that this was not some action by some overzealous local commander or even at the level of their Western Theatre Command. That an action such as this was

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initiated, even as the world was grappling with the first wave of the Covid pandemic, clearly pointed to the fact that it had to have had 'blessings' right from the very top.

We immediately launched Op Snow Leopard, the induction of our reserve formations, which were in any case ready to move. The only difference was that they were moved by air in Air Force C-17s, which had been acquired precisely for such large-scale strategic moves. There was full synergy between the DG Air Ops, Air Marshal BR Krishna and our DGMO, Lt Gen Paramjit Singh Sangha.[15] The speed of our response and the manner in which we are able to induct forces, including armour and artillery, was copybook and fully validated our Operational Air Move Plans (OAMP), so painstakingly made and refined over the years. All formations were fully equipped with adequate cold-weather clothing and all other equipment necessary for deployment and prolonged stay in inhospitable high-altitude areas. On disembarking, all formations were moved closer to their deployment areas, with adequate time to carry out acclimatization. Full credit must go to the respective Operations and Operational Logistics Branches, particularly of the Air Force. Aircraft were ready and waiting on the tarmac, whether at Delhi or Chandigarh as per the requirements.

While this induction was underway, or more likely on account of the speed of our response, it was the PLA who first suggested that we should have Corps Commander-level meetings to defuse the situation. This would be between their Commander of the South Xinjiang Military Region (SXMR), Maj Gen Liu Lin, and our 14 Corps Commander, Lt Gen Harinder Singh. Although the rank on the PLA side appears one level lower, it was functionally equivalent, and the CSG cleared this proposal.[16] Accordingly, it was decided to hold the first Senior Highest Military Commander Level

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(SHMCL)[17] Meeting at the Chushul–Moldo meeting point on the Chinese side (Moldo) in the first week of June 2020.

The first SHMCL meeting took place as scheduled at Moldo. Both sides had delegations comprising the field commanders on either side. The IA delegation also had representation from the ITBP. On the PLA side, their Political Commissar was also part of the delegation. It was a marathon meeting lasting close to twelve hours, primarily because of the time spent in translation, breaks to confer in private and administrative breaks. As a result of these discussions, both sides agreed to disengage from the friction points of PP-14, PP-15 and PP-17A. The PLA was not keen on discussing the situation on the North Bank. When the matter was brought up, they countered by saying that we could settle the smaller issues first and then move on to bigger issues. The exact modalities for the disengagement were to be worked out through HMCL[18] meetings at respective locations and levels. Whenever these meetings took place, and many more would happen in the future, there was no official record or minutes of the meeting. The decisions arrived at were only in the nature of 'in-principle' agreements subject to ratification at appropriate levels on either side, in our case by the CSG. This arrangement had an inherent drawback in that what was said and understood by either party could be at variance based on individual perceptions, and there was no method to protect against any retraction from what had been agreed upon 'in-principle'. This was to have grave repercussions later on.

The Galwan River flows from East to West, before joining the Shyok River at KM 120 on the Darbuk–Shyok–Daulat Beg Oldi (DSDBO) road, where there is an IA outpost. From this forward operating base, patrols would go up to PP-14 periodically. The distance from KM 120 to PP-14 is hardly 10 km as the crow flies but much longer by foot along the banks of the river, having

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to criss-cross it at numerous places. About a kilometre short of PP-14, another *nala* flowing North to South joins the Galwan River. After crossing this junction, it was relatively easy to go up to PP-14. Just South and East of this junction was a flattish piece of ground which could also be developed into a helipad. Because of the terrain, going to PP-14 was time-consuming and it was difficult to go there and return in a single day. The alternatives were either to establish a temporary observation post (OP) at PP-14, which would have been in violation of protocols or construct a motorable track as far forward as possible, at least till the Nala River Junction. Work on this track had already commenced, including the construction of bridges.

On the Chinese side, their nearest post was Galwan, almost 25 km further East of PP-14. Galwan had been an IA Company post that was captured by the Chinese in the 1962 War. Maj (later Lt Col) Shrikant Sitaram Hasabnis, father of the Hasabnis brothers, had fought here and been taken prisoner of war (PW), and repatriated after seven months in captivity.[19] I had often met Lt Col SS Hasabnis during my school days and had always been impressed by his calmness and simplicity. The PLA did not have any road connectivity towards PP-14 except for a natural surface track and they too were improving this track. It was under these circumstances that the earliest clash of May 2020 had occurred, after which they remained encamped a few kilometres away to the East. The PLA had not only objected to our movements up to PP-14 but in a surprising turn, insisted on patrolling up to the Nala River Junction or 'Estuary' as they called it. This was firmly and categorically denied.

This was the stage when the HMCL meeting was held in the second week of May, in the area of the Junction since it was the only flattish space in that general area. Where one meets is also important, based on who suggests it, as it implies control over

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that location. During these discussions, both sides agreed to go back and restore the status quo ante. Just as the deliberations were winding down, the PLA side requested that since it was getting late and their main location quite far away, they be permitted to pitch two tents in the vicinity of the Junction as a temporary arrangement only. Our Commander said that he would consider this request and would have to consult his superiors on it. The two sides broke off just as dusk was setting in, and the IA delegation began the return walk. The PLA, however, after making a show of going back, returned with two tents, pitched them up and presented us with a fait accompli. It was evident that this was a pre-decided tactic on their part. This would become a recurring feature in the negotiations, in that the PLA would assume that all their proposals had been accepted whereas they had only been 'heard'.

I only got to know of this request the next morning and immediately turned it down but was then told that the tents had already been pitched. I was quite unhappy at this turn of events as was the NSA when I reported the matter to him a little later. I felt that the PLA should be asked to move back forthwith. However, Northern Command felt that the location was not suitable for camping and the tents would in any case get submerged as the water levels in the river would rise in the summer. I wasn't entirely convinced, but since this had been the first HMCL, and the beginning of the disengagement process, this was grudgingly acceded to, especially since the tents had already been pitched. However, it was impressed upon Northern Command that they should keep reminding the PLA about the temporary nature of this arrangement and keep pressing them to withdraw. The Command and Corps insisted that it was not an issue and they could get it vacated at any time.

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In the meanwhile, the Passing-Out Parade (POP) of the Indian Military Academy was scheduled for 13 May 2020. Due to the unfolding Covid situation, most activities had been curtailed or cancelled. However, the POP is a once-in-a-lifetime occasion. Whether to hold a Parade or not was the question. On balance, we thought we should go through with it, and I decided that I would review the Parade myself to show the country and the world that nothing stops the Indian Army. In any case, because of social distancing and travel restrictions, parents would not be physically present but would only be able to see the live telecast. The Parade went off flawlessly, of course. In my address to the soon-to-be-commissioned Gentlemen Cadets, I stressed the importance of being ever ready for action, and the import of that was clear to everyone on account of the ongoing situation in Eastern Ladakh. For the parents, I had a special message, '*Kal tak woh aapke bacche the; kal se woh hamare bacche hain*' (till yesterday, they were your kids; from tomorrow, they are ours) in recollection of the words spoken to my mother so many years ago. The Parade marks the culmination of training, the 'Antim Pag', but it is also the 'Commencement' of an entirely new phase of life, as had been pointed out during Amala's graduation ceremony in 2012. I felt that this aspect needed to be highlighted and that the real work starts now. Accordingly, a marble plate with the words '*Pehla Kadam*' (First Step), signifying a new beginning, was placed, over which the newly commissioned officers would cross over in slow march, post the oath-taking and commissioning (pipping) ceremony. In the media interaction that followed, I was asked about the situation in Ladakh and in light of the ongoing dialogue, I replied that India as a country strongly opposed any unilateral attempts to forcefully change the status quo, but that the

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situation had stabilized and that I was cautiously optimistic of an early resolution. Famous last words!

Flag-level meetings had been continuing at other locations, including at PP-15 and PP-17A, where troops fell back over agreed distances, thereby reducing the chances of violent face-offs, and this had been the basis for my prognosis. At PP-14, however, whenever we asked the PLA to remove their tents, they kept changing their stance. From 'some more time was needed', to 'we will check with our superiors', to it 'being beyond the mandate of the talks'. From this stonewalling, it became evident that there had been no intention of removing those tents in the first place. To counter this, we also decided to pitch our own tents in the same general area.

When our party went to pitch the tents, there was a violent reaction from their side. Col Santosh Babu, CO 16 BIHAR, went forward with a small party of troops to attempt to defuse the situation but the PLA were in no mood to relent and attacked the CO's party too. Thereafter, it became a free-for-all. With darkness setting in, both sides rushed in additional troops and a see-saw engagement continued throughout the night. Although armed, neither side opened fire, instead using batons or clubs and throwing or rolling down stones on each other's positions. Due to better connectivity on their side, the PLA were able to move troops forward in APCs, which changed the balance in their favour. Joshi rang me up at around 0130 hours on 16 June, informing me of the unfolding situation. He also said that he feared there were as yet an unspecified number of fatal casualties, including perhaps the CO himself. Even though the news was bad, I told Joshi (Jo) that we must hit back this time at least, and make them pay the price for their misadventure. Daylight revealed a not-so-favourable situation. Few jawans who could not make it back at night or who had

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been separated started trickling back. Five jawans had died of injuries in the melee. The next morning, as the head count was taken, we realized many were missing. As tense negotiations began, many of our boys, who had either got disoriented or had been briefly detained by the PLA without food or medical aid, returned to base. However, fifteen of them succumbed to the combined effects of their injuries and hypothermia.[20] It was one of the saddest days of my entire career. We are in a profession where death is always lurking around the corner. Every patrol or ambush can be your last. As a Company and Battalion Commander, my unit had suffered casualties, and I was always stoic in the face of adversity or bad news. Yet, losing twenty men in a day was hard to bear. It fell upon me to break this news to the RM. I had already spoken to him about the earlier five casualties, but we had not yet released this news. We discussed this aspect and I advised the RM that we should not try to hide the truth, which in any case would come out once we informed the families of the deceased. The media had already got a whiff of it, so it would be much more pragmatic to give out the facts and nip any speculation in the bud. In this, I was guided by what my journalist friend, Nitin Gokhale, had told me many years ago during a media capsule at the Army War College, Mhow. He had said that if you don't give the media the news, they will invent their own. Much better instead to give out the facts truthfully, and the media will only respect you for it. It then fell upon the RM to break the news to the nation, which he did with great dignity.

What about casualties on the Chinese side? Hard to say, since they have a very opaque system of reporting. Putting together the various accounts as part of the after-action debrief, of those involved in the scuffle as also those who had been detained, it was evident that they too suffered substantially.

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Our men who were in Chinese hands had been kept out in the open and they had seen several bodies being fished out of the river. Whenever that happened, they were subjected to a fresh round of beatings. The sheer savagery of their response was in itself indicative of the losses they had suffered. Initially, they did not admit to any casualties at all; then many months later, admitted to four or five killed, including the CO on their side. An independent report by a group of Australian researchers put the figure to at least thirty-eight killed.[21] A separate Russian (TASS) report put the figure closer to forty-five killed, which was consistent with other intelligence reports, including those from the US.[22]

The PM, Shri Narendra Modi, visited Leh in July, accompanied by the CDS and myself. Interacting with the troops at Nimu, he lauded the bravery of our troops as also the 'bravery of all the proud sons of Mother India who made the supreme sacrifice at the Galwan Valley'.[23] The PM emphasized that the era of expansionism was over and that India's commitment to peace should not be seen as a sign of weakness. He also visited the Military Hospital at Leh to meet the injured personnel. This visit did much to raise our morale and only further strengthened our resolve.

16 June is Xi Jinping's birthday. This is not a day he will forget any time soon. For the first time in over two decades, the Chinese and the PLA had suffered fatal casualties. They had been following wolf-warrior diplomacy[24] and salami-slicing[25] tactics everywhere with impunity, browbeating smaller neighbours like Nepal and Bhutan, while staking their ever-increasing claims in the South China Sea, without having to pay any costs, especially in terms of human lives. It took India and the Indian Army to show to the world that enough is enough and to challenge the neighbourhood bully.

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4.2

At Close Quarters: A Nation Responds

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The day began with a phone call from Jo.

Under the cover of darkness, the PLA had moved troops from Moldo to the area of Chuti Changla, towards the South Bank of the Pangong Tso. They had done this in two phases in the night of 29/30 August 2020, starting from about 0100 hours, in two parties of about forty to fifty personnel each, followed by another such group at 0230 hours. Given the circumstances, our troops were on high alert and had monitored this entire move. The assessment was that the PLA would try and repeat what they had done on the North Bank and try to occupy dominating features on their perception of the LAC. We had been alive to this possibility and as soon as we came to know of this development, Northern Command immediately decided to move troops up and pre-empt the PLA. These plans had been deliberated upon earlier and troops had been earmarked for the purpose. Thus began a race to the ridge lines.

While this was in progress, I called up the RM, EAM and NSA and gave them a quick rundown of events, including our own response. I also suggested that a CSG meeting that was

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scheduled for the following day be convened immediately, which was agreed to and we met at 1130 hours the same day, i.e. 30 August. It was evident from the PLA's actions that they were up to no good and their actions were not matching their words. In fact, in a hotline message sent on the morning of 29 August, they had categorically said that in the interest of stability, there should be 'no mountain manoeuvres', especially at night. Having sent that message, probably to lull us into a false sense of security, that is precisely what they did the same night itself. Such perfidy!

It became clear that in the face of such provocations, we too had to carry out some actions to make the PLA rethink their creeping tactics and teach them a lesson. This involved carrying out actions on both the North and South Banks of the Pangong Tso. On the South Bank, our troops had occupied some of the important heights along the ridge line to where it merged into the Spanggur Gap, an international high mountain pass on the LAC, at an altitude of 4350 m. Since both sides had been racing to the top, the situation on this Ridge was that portions were with the PLA, while the majority was with us, including Gurung Hill and Magar Hill, which dominated the Spanggur Gap from the North. By now, we had also inducted the HQ of 17 Corps, the Mountain Strike Corps, under Lt Gen Savneet Singh, along with some of their supporting elements. All the additional forces we had inducted as part of Operation Snow Leopard, were placed under the command of this Corps. We thus had 14 Corps looking after the defence of the Corps Zone and spearheading the talks, while 17 Corps was exclusively tasked with offensive operations. This was a much neater arrangement rather than having the same Corps looking after both defensive and offensive aspects.

On the North Bank, we decided to send troops through Finger 3 to occupy the higher reaches of Finger 4, thereby

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dominating the PLA positions on the lower heights. This would also give us a clear view into their depth areas. Another two Companies were tasked to occupy the passes of Ane La and Kiu La, which was where all these fingers converged, which they did by the morning of the 30th. To the South, it was felt that the PLA may attempt some more actions since they had been pre-empted in the Chuti Changla area. Hence, a decision was taken to occupy Rezang La and Rechin La on the Kailash Range South of the Spanggur Gap, since this was the most obvious PLA response to our actions further North. Occupation of these additional positions would then dominate the Spanggur Gap from both North and South, denying the PLA any offensive options through this gap. Occupation of the two passes would not only give us observation into their depth areas and garrison at Moldo but also provide depth to our own location of Chushul.[1] These plans were put in motion—in fact, the orders were passed even while the meeting was in progress by Maj Gen RC Tiwari,[2] ADGMO(A), by telephone directly to the Army Commander, before anybody could change their mind.

The question of whether or not to open fire remained hanging. We (the Army) were of the opinion that protocols are fine but if they are being violated, then they become null and void. It is because of these protocols and the belief that we will not open fire, that the PLA was coming forward in large numbers in a non-tactical manner, reminiscent of their human-wave tactics. If this were to recur and our own positions were overrun, then the question would again be asked as to why, if we were armed, were we not opening fire in the face of such blatant acts of aggression. As it is, some reports had appeared in the media that our own personnel, especially at Galwan, were unarmed. This report was categorically denied. Troops moving out of their operating base go out armed and

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equipped for the task at hand. After much debate, it was agreed upon that as a last resort, if our own physical security was at stake, that detachment and that detachment alone, could open fire in self-defence.

By the evening of the 30th, we were in a strong position both on the North and South Bank as well as the Kailash Range. On the North Bank, we had about a Brigade-plus strength (1/1 GR, 5/4 GR, 2 SIKH LI and 9 SF) as also 17 KUMAON and 16 PUNJAB from the local formation; on the South Bank almost two Brigades-worth of troops (2 DOGRA, 11 SIKH LI, 6 SIKH, 2 LADAKH SCOUTS, 4 LADAKH SCOUTS and 7 VIKAS). On the Kailash Ranges further South, was another Brigade (6 GRENADIERS, 29 PUNJAB, 13 MAHAR). Elements of Mech Forces (18 GUARDS, 53 Armoured Regt) had also been staged forward and were at the base of these Ridges, including at Tara Post. All these units and formations were those of 6 Mtn Division and 39 Mtn Division, that had been painstakingly inducted into the sector over the previous two months, as also the local units and formations. They had had time to acclimatize as well as carry out training in the rear areas in this high-altitude region. They were fully equipped with all the clothing and equipment required for carrying out their tasks. And when the time came, all of them performed splendidly. In the words of Lt Gen HS Panag, 'Our deception—both at the strategic and tactical level—was perfect to a fault as was the tactical movement of our troops.'[3] What was even more creditable, in my view, is that we had been able to achieve this kind of surprise despite the heightened state of alertness. We definitely caught the PLA with their pants down.

The PLA reaction was not long in coming. On the 30th evening itself, they moved forward some troops in the area of the Kailash Range, stopping about 500 m short of our locations

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and started digging in. These PLA locations were at lower heights and directly under our observation. As such, they were of no threat to us, but if they were to come up in strength and try to outflank or surround our localities, then we would have to take action. The situation was tense and nearing breaking point. While this was underway, there was a Hot Line message from the PLA at about 1730 hours, requesting a Flag Meeting at the Chushul–Moldo Meeting Point. There was no time to lose. Brig Gill[4], Cdr 114 Inf Bde, the reserve Brigade of the Corps, showed exceptional initiative in immediately moving forward to the Meeting Point all by himself, knowing well that tempers were running high and that he might get a hostile response. He was met by his counterpart of the Border Defence Regiment, who said that we should abide by the strategic guidance of our leaders, that they don't want war and that we should freeze all movement till the next SHMCL meeting. However, their actions on ground belied his words. When this was brought to his notice, he said that he would try his best to contain the situation but that since these troops were 'from the outside', it was proving to be difficult. The meeting lasted from about 1830 to 2300 hours and before breaking off, Brig Gill reiterated that they should stop all forward movement and not try to close in, or else we would open fire. It was a tense night for all of us. Earlier in the evening, in the area of Gurung Hill on the South bank, one JCO of 7 VIKAS (Special Frontier Force), Nyima Tenzin, was killed when he stepped on a vintage mine while rallying his troops. He was posthumously awarded the Asadharan Suraksha Seva Praman Patra.[5]

The daylight hours of 31 August saw a lot of movement on the PLA side, even as we consolidated our own position. Troops dug down, prepared field defences and laid barbed-wire obstacles about 50 m forward of their positions. This was to be

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the 'Red Line'. If the PLA were to attempt to storm this line, then we would be forced to fire in self-defence. During the day, the PLA moved additional forces forward, including to Chuti Changla. Now that we were on the Kailash Range, each and every move of the PLA was under our observation. At Rezang La and Rechin La, fourteen ICVs[6] had been moved up and a full squadron of tanks lay in wait at Tara Base. At Mukhpari on the Kailash Range, which overlooked the Spanggur Gap from the South, about a Company strength of the PLA came to the location of 29 PUNJAB, stopping about 300 m short at 1130 hours, and went back after about fifteen minutes when told not to advance any further. Another group of PLA numbering close to 100 troops came to the location of 13 MAHAR at 1400 hours right up to the barbed-wire fencing about 30–35 m away. This group was more aggressive, probably due to their greater numbers, and started shouting for us to take down our sangars and other fortifications, making threatening gestures and even firing two rounds in the air. Col Manish, the Commanding Officer who was present at the location, showed great presence of mind and remained cool-headed throughout this episode while also restraining his own troops. When the PLA tried to cross the barbed wire, we too fired three shots to more telling effect. This immediately put the PLA on the defensive and this group too withdrew.

Towards the afternoon, movement of PLA armour was also observed in the area of their garrison at Moldo. Seeing this, our tanks at Tara Base were also ordered to move up to Rechin La. Armour is traditionally used in the plains and desert terrain, and even if in hilly terrain, only on valley floors that are wide and undulating. It is said that 'tanks hate mountains' and here we were, sending tanks up in high altitude areas, climbing up the steep hillside like mountain goats, at altitudes of over

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15,000 feet. This in itself was an unprecedented manoeuvre, but nevertheless brought home the necessity of having a light tank in our inventory akin to the Type-15 light tanks of the PLA, which were now ranged across us. Some activities had been spotted on the North Bank too, including about 500 PLA troops in riot gear assembling in an area about 500 m to the East of Finger 4. All these movements and probing actions made it apparent that something more was to happen. A whole Regiment worth of PLA tanks was lined up on the track leading up from their garrison towards Rechin La.

At 2015 hours on the evening of 31 August, Jo rang me up, quite worried. He reported that four tanks supported by infantry had slowly started moving up the track towards Rechin La. They had fired an illuminating round but this had had no effect. I had clear orders not to open fire, 'till cleared from the very top'. A flurry of calls followed, between the RM, EAM, NSA, CDS and myself over the next half-hour. To each and every one my question was, 'What are my orders?' At 2110 hours, Northern Command again rang up, the tanks had continued moving ahead and were now less than a km from the top. I rang up the RM again at 2125 hours, with the latest and once more asked for clear directions. The situation was tense. Telephone lines were buzzing. In the DGMO operations room, various options were being considered and discarded. The situation had to be monitored, not only at Rechin La/Eastern Ladakh but all across the Northern Front, including areas across Eastern Command. The entire Front was on high alert, especially at the known friction points.

Meanwhile, there had been an exchange of Hot Line messages. The PLA Commander, Maj Gen Liu Lin, suggested that both sides should stop any further move and that the two local commanders should meet at the pass at 0930 hours the

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next morning, with only three personnel each. This seemed reasonable and I called up the RM and NSA at 2200 hours to share this news. I had hardly put the phone down when Jo rang up once again at 2210 hours. He said that the tanks had started moving up again and were now only about 500 m away. As per my earlier instructions, they had fired a rocket launcher round into the hillside ahead of them as a warning shot but that had failed to deter them. He recommended that the only way to stop them was by opening up with our own medium artillery, which he said was ready and waiting. Artillery duels were a routine feature on the LC with Pakistan. On any given day or night, perhaps hundreds of rounds would get fired as per the authority delegated to the Divisional and Corps Commanders. If the situation warranted, some suspicious movement or even to counter Pakistani artillery fire, they were free to open up without having to ask anyone up the chain of command. But this was a totally different ball game. My position was critical, caught between the Command who wanted to open fire with all possible means and the CCS, which had yet to give me clear-cut executive orders. Moreover, time was running out.

I conveyed the criticality of the situation to the RM, who said he would get back to me, which he did, by about 2230 hours. He said that he had spoken to the PM and that it was purely a military decision. '*Jo ucchit samjho woh karo*' (Do whatever you deem is appropriate). I had been handed a hot potato. With this carte blanche, the onus was now totally on me. I took a deep breath and sat silently for a few minutes. All was quiet save for the ticking of the wall clock. I was in my den at Army House, with the map of J & K and Ladakh on one wall, Eastern Command on another. They were unmarked maps, but as I looked at them, I could visualize the location of each and every unit and formation. We were ready in all respects, but did I

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really want to start a war? The country was in bad shape, reeling under the Covid pandemic. The economy was faltering, global supply chains had broken down. Would we be able to ensure a steady supply of spares, etc., under these conditions, in case of a long-drawn-out action? Who were our supporters in the global arena, and what about the collusive threat from China and Pakistan? A hundred different thoughts flashed through my mind. This was no war game being played in a sand model room of the Army War College, but a life and death situation.

After a few moments of quiet reflection, I called Jo. 'We cannot be the first ones to fire,' I told him, as it would provide the Chinese with an excuse, a *casus belli*, to escalate and paint us as the aggressors. Even at Mukhpari (on the Kailash Range) the previous day, it had been the PLA who had fired first (being only two rounds by the PLA and three rounds by us, it had escaped the attention of the media). I felt that we should maintain this stance. Instead, I told him to move a troop of our tanks right to the forward slopes of the Pass and depress their guns so that the PLA would be staring down the barrels of our guns. This was done forthwith and the PLA tanks, which had by then reached within a few hundred metres of the top, stopped in their tracks. Their light tanks would have been no match for our medium tanks. It was a game of bluff and the PLA blinked first.

In the midst of all this, we had not forgotten about the area of DBO and Galwan, from where everything had started. This area, Sub Sector North (SSN), was also beefed up by sending an additional Brigade along with Mech Forces. Once again, while the Infantry was able to move quickly, the mechanized column had some issues of trafficability. The area of Eastern Ladakh which has a frontage of 800-plus km was the Area of Responsibility of 3 Mtn Division. This area had now been reinforced by another two Divisions with their complements of armour and artillery.

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The entire area was teeming with troops. The priority now was to provide adequate habitat for these additional forces, particularly if we had to sustain through the winter. Plans for this were formulated and started getting implemented.

Prior to these developments, the second round of SHMCL talks had been held on 22 June, a week after the Galwan clash. The PLA tried to lay the blame for the clash on us, which was categorically rejected. In an unguarded moment, during a break in the talks, when the two Generals were by themselves, Maj Gen Liu Lin even mentioned having suffered numerous fatal casualties, including their CO (which was belatedly accepted by the Chinese) but did not specify any numbers. While the focus was on restarting the deliberations to finalize modalities for disengagement, the shadow of the clash loomed over the talks and not much headway was made. As part of the dialogue with China was another process called the WMCC—the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India–China Border Affairs. The WMCC had been set up through an India–China agreement in January 2012, for improved institutionalized information exchange on border-related issues.[7] The WMCC was to be headed by a Joint Secretary-level officer on either side. In our case, it was Shri Naveen Srivastava, then JS in the East Asia Division of the MEA.[8] Naveen was to play a crucial role in the talks that followed.

As part of the joint efforts and coordination between the MEA and Defence, it was decided that there should be a WMMC meeting before or after each round of Corps Commander-level talks, i.e., the SHMCL talks. This would enable us to project our point in a more formal and institutionalized manner with the added advantage that minutes of the WMCC meetings were on record, and thus less prone to misinterpretation or

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recanting later. The third round of talks between the military commanders was held on 30 June, followed by a fourth round on 14 July. The PLA was keener on de-escalation and concerned about our continued build-up, whereas we were insisting on disengagement from the friction points and a return to the status quo ante, i.e., as prevailing in April 2020. Both sides prepared their respective proposal based on their viewpoints, but nothing much changed on ground. Contrarily, the PLA continued improving their posture, building shelters and field defences, which was a sure indication of their long-term intent.

During the first round of talks, discussions on disengagement had commenced starting from the friction points of PP-14, PP-15 and PP-17A, as suggested by the PLA. It was while we were still working out the modalities of this, that the clash at Galwan had occurred, leading to a setback in the disengagement process. This issue was revived during the second round of talks and many proposals and counter-proposals were made. While there was a general consensus on both sides to fall back, the sticking point remained as to what would be the reference point for the disengagement, as this could become a benchmark for any future border settlement. When the DGMO and I brainstormed on this issue, we thought why not have two reference points, with each side falling back a specified distance from their respective reference points? This matter was brought forward in the CSG deliberations and thought to be practical. The discussions during the third round on 30 June revolved around this and the PLA also seemed to be on board. Accordingly, a tentative plan was made out wherein the PLA would remain 5 km to the East of their reference point, thus taking them about 3 km East of PP-14. Similarly, the IA would remain 5 km East of our reference point, putting us slightly West of the River Nala Junction (Estuary). The area between the two reference points,

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which had been the location of the bloody clash of 15 June, was to become a buffer zone with no movement by either side. This was agreeable to both sides, and after ratification by the authorities on their side, the PLA conveyed their acceptance of this proposal through a Hot Line message.

Based on this, the timeline for the disengagement was worked out and over two days, the PLA fell back, removing all their tents and shelters and restoring all land forms to as near their original state as possible.[9] By the 6th morning, the PLA had vacated this entire area, and it was a good start to the disengagement process. During these talks, disengagement from PP-15 and PP-17A had also been discussed, but since we were making headway on PP-14, we did not press too much on these locations. Nevertheless, the PLA did make some token reductions at both locations by pulling back their most forward elements. However, the more important issue of the North Bank of the Pangong Tso remained unresolved, with the PLA once again insisting that we should resolve these issues first (PP-14, PP-15 and PP-17A) while remaining non-committal on the North Bank.

In the fourth round held on 14 July, the focus now shifted towards disengagement on the North Bank of the Pangong Tso, i.e., a step-wise withdrawal of personnel, weapons and equipment to mutually agreed distances; as well as de-escalation, to reduce the overall forces of both sides in the region.[10] Additionally, legacy issues of Depsang and Demchok were also raised, which pre-dated the stand-offs of May 2020.[11] Once again, the PLA responded with the same old formulation of 'let us settle current issues first and then we will consider discussing the others'. As far as the North Bank was concerned, the PLA had made considerable changes to the land form and had put up a large number of shelters for habitat and administrative

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purposes. They had also moved forward their boats used for patrolling the lake from Finger 8 to Finger 5 and built floating jetties. At this point, it should be remembered that the PLA was on the lower reaches of Finger 4, while the IA was in containment positions on Finger 3. The PLA proposed that they would move back from Finger 4 to Finger 5, while we should move back from Finger 3 to our Dhan Singh Thapa (DST) Post, which is about halfway between Fingers 2 and 3. This was a totally unacceptable proposal. We reiterated our stance that reversion to the status quo ante of April 2020 was the only way forward. The PLA once again expressed concern at our build-up and made five recommendations namely, de-escalation (not disengagement) along isolated areas; de-escalation to be based on mutual equal security (which was our stance); respect LAC claims; stop fresh induction of troops; and maintain good channels of communication.

From time to time, I would brief the PM. My MA would get a call from the PMO, usually Shri Sanjay Bhavsar (OSD—Appointment and Tour), asking for my availability and saying that the PM wanted to meet me. This would be followed by another call from one of the JSs or Directors asking for the Agenda. The first time this happened, I conveyed that it was the PM who had summoned me and there was no agenda as such. No matter, came the response, whatever you intend to say, please send a write-up on each point. While the crisis in Eastern Ladakh was ongoing, it was the main agenda of the interaction, but at other times, I had to rack my mind to see what were the issues worth bringing to the notice of the PM at a one-on-one level. Transitioning to Integrated Battle Groups (IBG), for example, or the challenges in implementing the Supreme Court orders on granting Permanent Commission to Women Officers.

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I would brief him in the Conference Room at Lok Kalyan Marg. Because of the Covid restrictions, the PM would sit at one end of the table, and I would brief from the other end. The PM would listen patiently, never once interrupting, asking questions only at the end. When asked, during the initial days of the crisis, whether we had any options, I gave my assurance that we had generated quid pro quo (QPQ) options, not only in Eastern Ladakh but all across the Northern Front. Towards the end, time permitting, the PM would recount some experiences from his Chief Minister days, his vision for the future or of how once while travelling he had been impressed by the conduct of the person serving him tea, who he learnt later had been in the NCC (as had our PM). All these were not idle reminiscences, but had some significance, a lesson in management perhaps or a way forward. On return to my office, I would jot down these points and ponder over them to see what needed to be done. There was never any tension in these interactions and I would usually return with a much lighter heart. Of course, I always kept the RM informed of these interactions and what had transpired in them.

The fifth round of talks held on 2 August remained inconclusive. The Chinese side revived their proposal of a partial pullback, while we reiterated our stance of full restoration of the status quo ante. This was followed by a WMCC meeting on 24 July, in which the same point was restated and both sides agreed that an early and complete disengagement was essential to normalize relations between the two countries, which had hit an all-time low after the Galwan incident.[12] The NSA, Shri Ajit Doval, had also been speaking to his counterpart Mr Wang Yi, the Chinese Foreign Minister and Special Representative, from time to time, including on 6 July just prior to the disengagement at PP-14, and he had also conveyed the

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importance of restoring the status quo.[13] Thus, at various levels, the same point was being driven home.

On 4 Sep, Dr S Jaishankar, our Minister for External Affairs, met his counterpart, State Councillor and Foreign Minister Mr Wang Yi at Moscow, on the sidelines of the SCO meet. In this meeting, which took place only a few days after the actions of end August 2020, an agreement on a five-point approach to resolve the stand-off was reached. These were to 1) earnestly implement the important consensus reached by the leaders of the two countries, 2) strengthen communication on the ground, 3) avoid misunderstandings and misjudgements, 4) stop sending more troops to the frontline, and 5) refrain from unilaterally changing the situation on the ground, and avoid taking any actions that may complicate the situation.[14] In September itself, the RM, Shri Rajnath Singh, met his counterpart, Gen Wei Fenghe and sternly conveyed the same message, namely that China's aggressive behaviour was in violation of protocols, and that unilateral attempts to change the status quo would not be tolerated.[15] Naveen Srivastava had accompanied the EAM and was a party to the deliberations, as also present during the meeting between the Defence Ministers.

In all the meetings of the SHLMC held so far, while the Chinese side had their political commissar in attendance, we did not have any representation from the civilian side. The drawback was that our Corps Commander had to refer back on most issues, as agreeing to seemingly minor concessions in respect of Eastern Ladakh might have far-reaching consequences in relation to the settlement of the border issue as a whole. When I first broached this topic (of inserting an MEA representative in the delegation) with Northern Command, they were not too keen on this proposal, as they felt that it might dilute the

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position and authority of the Corps Commander. However, on balance, we felt that it would be an advantage to have the JS (East Asia) as part of our delegation. Thereafter, starting from the sixth round onwards, Naveen was always there and provided the much-needed institutional continuity that had been lacking earlier.[16] The Corps Commander designate Lt Gen PGK Menon, who was to take over the Corps the next month, also participated to get a feel of the discussions that he would have to take forward.[17]

The monsoon session of the Parliament was scheduled to commence from 14 September. It was the first time that the Parliament would be in session since the face-off had begun in mid-May. A lot had been said and written on it, with the Opposition baying for blood. It was evident that a statement would have to be made in Parliament, to quell unwanted speculation. But who should make the statement? The MEA in the form of the EAM or the MoD in the form of the RM? The MEA was of the view that it should be the EAM as it involved another country and that had been the norm even during earlier stand-offs at Depsang and Chumar. However, in light of the fact that the casualties had been suffered by the Army and the counter-moves of end-August 2020 were also carried out by the Army, it was decided that it should be the RM who ought to give the statement. We got down to preparing a draft statement for the RM. We felt it had to be factual, with no hyperbole, yet reassuring. The RM though, wanted it to be a little stronger. He said it must have passages that arouse our spirit of nationalism and which should get the MPs across party lines 'thumping the tables' in a show of solidarity. We had to get everything just right, leaving no room for any blowback. Proceedings of the Parliament are on record and any mis-statement could backfire at a later date. We had to anticipate any awkward questions that

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may be posed and nip those in the bud by including them in the Statement itself. Concurrently, the establishment reached out to various MPs, cutting across party lines to stress that this was a matter of national security. In trying to embarrass the government of the day, the nation's image should not suffer. It would amount to 'cutting the nose to spite the face'. I have reason to believe that the point was well taken and everyone showed great maturity. The RM gave his statement to the Lok Sabha on the 14th itself and after a day's gap, to the Rajya Sabha on 16 September.[18] In his speech, the RM said, 'It is because of the great bravery of our Armed Forces in the face of harsh adverse climatic conditions that we maintained the edge. Our Armed Forces proved yet again that the territorial integrity of our country remains safe in their hands and their grit and determination to safeguard our borders is unwavering.' I had gone to 15 Corps for a visit to forward areas and when I went to meet the RM on my return, he was visibly happy and relieved that his address in Parliament had been well received.

The ongoing situation in Eastern Ladakh did not mean that other visits or activities could be put on hold. Despite the Covid restrictions, I continued to visit troops in the forward areas, especially in Northern, Central and Eastern Commands. On this particular visit, I was able to visit 109 Infantry Brigade (19 DOGRA), which visit had been cancelled earlier due to bad weather. I was to visit another unit of the same Brigade, but there had been an incident of sniping from across the LC a day earlier, so that plan was shelved. Instead, we went to 56 Rashtriya Rifles (MARATHA LI) in 53 Infantry Brigade. The jawans of the unit were happy at this change of plans and made special Maharashtrian snacks for me to have during the customary interaction over tea. During these visits to forward areas, we would alight from the ALH and move by road to

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the foot of the View Point, which would be perhaps 150 to 200 ft uphill. While climbing up, there would be small stands displaying some weapons or equipment every 50 ft or so, where the visiting officer would be briefed; but the real motive was to allow everyone to catch their breath in these high-altitude areas. The first couple of times, I went straightway to the top, saying that I would see the displays on the way down. My MA, Brig Vikrant Naik, had to discreetly tell me to go slow and stop as planned, as I was leaving everyone else, himself included, huffing and puffing behind.

While at Srinagar, I called on the Lieutenant Governor, Shri Manoj Sinha, and reviewed the security situation. More than a year had elapsed since the abrogation of Article 370 and there had been a perceptible improvement in the law-and-order situation. However, development activities had yet to really get rolling and the LG remarked that the entrenched local bureaucracy was proving to be a stumbling block. Shri Manoj Sinha was not a person to take things lying down and showed clear intent to get things moving even if it meant sacking a few of the more recalcitrant *babus*. While at the Corps HQ as part of the briefing, I was also told of an operation that had been carried out by 62 RR in mid-July, wherein three terrorists had been killed in an orchard. There had been murmurs right from the day of the operation that something was amiss, as it was not supported by any intelligence inputs. There was no immediate identification either, or reaction by the locals, who know exactly who is who. Later, it emerged that they were migrant labourers from Rajouri, not terrorists at all, and who prima facie appeared to have been gunned down in cold blood. In keeping with the zero tolerance to HR violations policy, an inquiry was immediately ordered, which confirmed our suspicions. My experience of operations as a CO during my

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2 RR days came in handy. Whenever an operation is too 'clean' and carried out surreptitiously or in isolation without involving the local police, it immediately raises a 'Red' flag, of it being a staged encounter. Based on the preliminary inquiry, disciplinary action was initiated, and the officer was Court Martialled and sentenced to life imprisonment.[19] When I met the RM at 1030 hours on 17 September, I apprised him of this development, which was certain to make headlines. This was followed by a CSG meeting at 1230 hours the same day in preparation for the sixth SHCML meeting scheduled for later in the week.

It is against this backdrop that the sixth round was held on 21 September. In the CSG meeting held earlier, we had brainstormed on the way forward and what should be our negotiating strategy. The end-state was clear, a return to the status quo, but what should or could be the lines of operation leading to that end-state? There was no question of accepting a partial pullback. As the NSA, Shri Ajit Doval, pointed out, it is the Chinese strategy to come forward five steps, then go back one step and make it appear like a great concession, yet gaining ultimately. Incessantly creeping forward one step at a time, in classic 'salami-slicing' tactics. The EAM was also quite clear that we should not be in a hurry to accept any partial solution but continue to negotiate from a principled position. No doubt his experience as Foreign Secretary and, more importantly, as Ambassador to China, guided his thinking.[20] We also agreed that the principle of first-in-first-out, i.e., resolving the earlier issue first should be our strategy. During this round, while agreeing to take forward the five-point consensus reached by the Foreign Ministers, it was the PLA who changed their tune and started stressing the need for disengagement, now that the tactical advantage lay with us. This was a major shift in their stance. They were also not happy with the developments on the

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diplomatic front, including the fact that an MEA representative was now party to the deliberations. Any obfuscation on their part was immediately countered by Naveen, who would quote exactly what had transpired in various meetings (between respective Foreign and Defence Ministers) and thus gave the Chinese no room to wriggle out of their commitments. While nothing concrete came out, various principles and options for disengagement were discussed. As anticipated, the PLA wanted the disengagement to commence from the Kailash Range (Rezang La and Rechin La) where we had the maximum advantage. We countered as planned, by saying that the older issue must be resolved first, 'first-in-first-out', and the disengagement should follow the pattern of North Bank–South Bank–Kailash Range. The meeting concluded with no concrete outcome but with a clear understanding that a time-bound road map for disengagement was needed.

From time to time, the EAM would also call me for one-on-one meetings, with no aides or staff officers present. In one of the earlier visits to his office, I saw that he had put a clear plexiglass sheet vertically on his office table, as a shield between himself and visitors as a Covid precaution. I liked the idea very much and implemented it myself. In one of the meetings, he said that he was very concerned and perturbed about the 'leaks' that were taking place to the media on the outcome of the discussions. These premature leaks were in fact jeopardizing the talks and I was even more concerned about it since it affected us the most. I assured the EAM that the leaks were not emanating from our side but also pointed out that firstly, there were far too many attendees for the CSG meetings, and secondly, that despite clear orders on the carriage of mobile phones into the MO Directorate, some of the senior DGs and Secretaries were non-compliant. On another occasion, he gave me a very

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interesting perspective on the talks. We (the Army) wanted an early resolution, but he had another perspective. 'The longer the talks draw out,' he said, 'the better, as the positions we now hold become semi-permanent and in time, it will become the "new status quo", which was precisely what China had been doing with all its neighbours on land and maritime boundary issues. We should be prepared to continue with our forward deployment not only for this winter but for as long as it takes, even years, if necessary, as had happened in resolving the Sumdorung Chu incident of 1987, "Operation Chequerboard", which had taken years to resolve.'[21] This perspective certainly influenced the manner in which we went about creating infrastructure in preparation for a 'long haul'.

The seventh round of talks was held on 12 October, in which, taking a cue from us, the Chinese included a representative from their Ministry of Oceanic and Border Affairs. The PLA came out with a proposal for disengagement. This proposal, presented during the meeting, which carried over to 13 October, envisaged a disengagement to be carried out over three days, commencing from 14 October, barely twenty-four hours later. This once again showed the presumptuousness of their approach, that whatever they proposed would be accepted lock, stock and barrel. The proposal itself was half-baked and envisaged disengagement from the South Bank and Kailash Range first, over three days (14–16 October), then after ground verification on 17 October, disengagement on the North Bank over a similar period of three days commencing 21 October. This was totally unacceptable to us on two counts; first, it started from the South Bank (as we had anticipated) and second, the pullback they were suggesting on the North Bank was not only partial but weighted heavily in their favour and in keeping with what the NSA, Shri Ajit Doval, had highlighted. Moreover, it

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was against the principle of 'mutual and equal security' agreed upon earlier. We were quite clear in our minds that the only leverage we had was the Kailash Range and once that was given up, the PLA would then find some excuse or the other and renege on their commitments for the North Bank. This proposal was rejected outright then and there. Instead, we said, that while the details of the three-day steps were acceptable, the disengagement should commence from the North Bank first. As a token of good faith, we would pull back some of our armour on the South Bank, from Tara Base to Chushul. If this was acceptable, we were willing to commence the disengagement from the 14th as proposed by them, but starting from the North Bank. This, of course, put them in a tizzy and they replied that they would have to 'consult with their authorities'. Although there was no concrete outcome, at least the cards were on the table and there was a starting point for future negotiations and the narrowing-down of differences. We once again suggested that we follow the Galwan Model for the disengagement process, as it had worked well and the area was free from any friction since the disengagement of 6 July.

The eighth round on 6 November 2020 was led by Lt Gen PGK Menon, who had taken over 14 Corps in October, with the JS (East Asia) in attendance. While the eighth round failed to achieve any breakthrough, specifics of a road map towards disengagement were spelt out. The issue of complete restoration of land forms was also clearly brought out, which the PLA had been conveniently silent about. In fact, at one point, they even suggested that the disengagement should be delinked from the issue of restoration of land forms. This was outrightly rejected. If the infrastructure remained, it would make it that much easier to rush back and re-occupy the vacated areas. A true measure of their sincerity would be in the

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dismantling of infrastructure and restoration of land forms. In this manner, through discussion, we kept whittling away at the points of divergence in order to reach a mutually acceptable solution. The peak winter months were spent in consolidating our positions, improving surface connectivity and constructing modern habitat, including large sheds capable of garaging armour and an underground Advanced Dressing Station, capable of undertaking surgeries. This spurt in infrastructure development was a strategic signal that we were ready to hold on for as long as it took.

On 10 November, I had my bimonthly tête-à-tête with the PM. This followed the same pattern; first, a call scheduling the meeting, then another asking for the agenda. Fortunately, this time around, there were quite a few points to brief him about. I had gone as scheduled at 1030 hours, but the PM came in only about twenty minutes later. As soon as he entered, he apologized for the delay, saying he had got caught up in a flurry of calls, which I thought was very gracious of him. I have always felt that one of the qualities of a true leader is that you value the time of your subordinates as much as you value your own time. I started off by giving feedback on my visit to Nepal and the positive vibes it had created, followed by the situation in Eastern Ladakh and the progress of the talks. I brought to his notice how leaks to the media were jeopardizing the talks, with the PLA often retracting from what had been discussed, as they felt that we were trying to corner them through these motivated leaks. I highlighted the rapid improvement in infrastructure that had taken place, and how, because of the Emergency Powers that had been delegated to the Service HQ, we had been able to achieve in five months what would otherwise have taken five years. The situation in J & K and the LC was discussed and I brought out that ceasefire violations and terrorist actions

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continued unabated, on account of which we had already suffered 35-plus killed and 150-plus injured, not to mention casualties to civilians and damage to their property and livestock. The topic of the Tour of Duty, unofficially called the 'Agnipath Scheme', which had been under formulation for some time, also came up, and I expressed my reservations on certain aspects of the scheme.[22] As usual in the end, the PM had some stories of his own. If in the last interaction, it was about the kite industry in Gujarat, this time it was about railway lines, more specifically, new railway lines. In every Budget, he said, we announce new lines to the middle of nowhere, spending crores of rupees and finally only about fifty people use that facility. He was candid enough to admit that he too had once been part of such a crowd, waving red flags and making such demands. That has always been his refrain—a lack of vision and wasteful expenditure. Just as I was leaving, a googly: '*Meri bhi ek beti Army mein hain, lekin kisi ko batana mat*' (I too have a daughter in the Army, but don't tell anyone). True to his wishes, I did not make any inquiries, though I did come to know later that it was his niece.

The ninth round was held on 24 January 2021. When this round commenced, we were ready to dig in our heels, but the PLA commenced the talks by agreeing to pull back beyond Finger 8 and restore all land forms. This was a pleasant surprise for us and a major breakthrough. All that remained was to prepare a detailed phase-wise, time-bound plan for each of the locations—North Bank, South Bank and Kailash Range. The minutes of the meeting were prepared and signed by the Military Commanders of either side. This itself was a departure from past practice. When this point had first been raised of keeping formal records, the MEA was not too keen, as border talks came under their remit. However, in the absence of proper records or minutes, it was difficult to move forward. Now, since

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an MEA representative was part of the delegation, the signing of an agreement at the military level was agreed to. The ninth round concluded on a positive note, with both sides agreeing to confirm the proposals at the earliest through the Hot Line.

On the home front, Isha was staying with us at Army House for her confinement, with the baby due in early February 2021. Isha and Simon had broken the good news earlier the previous year. As soon as Veena came to know of it, she dropped all plans of moving to Pune post-retirement. Her focus was now on Isha and the grandchild. Since 26 January was Republic Day, all offices had been shut down early on the 25th for security purposes, and I had returned home for lunch. Later in the day, Isha came to our room to say that she was feeling uncomfortable. We straightaway went to the Mayoom Hospital in Gurgaon, where Isha was going for her check-ups. After a quick check-up, the doctor felt that there was some foetal distress and that an immediate delivery was called for. We rang up Simon, who was still at school, it being a working day. Isha was wheeled into the OT, and even before Simon could reach, our grandchild, Arvin, was born. From the time Isha reported her discomfort to the birth was hardly two hours. It was the best Republic Day present ever, even better than my PVSM, which I had been awarded on the eve of Republic Day 2019.

While all this was going on, I was making regular visits to Leh and the forward areas to see for myself our deployment and infrastructure development in preparation for the forthcoming winter. Sometimes, I had to squeeze in these visits between other appointments. I was to leave for an official visit to South Korea in end-December, so I decided to visit the troops before Christmas. The schedule was so packed that the only free day was 23 December. We went early in the morning up to Leh, then by ALHs up to Tara Base and then up to Rechin La,

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driving along the watershed where the armour was facing off. We had taken off from Delhi at 0700 hours, with an altitude of 800 feet and temperature of 10 degrees Celsius. Within three hours, we were at Rechin La, with an altitude of 18,000 feet and temperature of minus 20 degrees. I went into the tents and shelters pitched on the hillsides, shared a cup of tea and spoke to the tank crews, who even in their wildest dreams had not imagined that they would be deployed at such heights. We stood at the pass in full view of the PLA armour, and I am sure they would have learnt later that it was the Army Chief who had visited. At the helipad, just before returning, I spoke to as many troops who were off-duty and told them what a splendid job they were doing. I also distributed some mithai, fresh from Delhi, for Christmas. I don't know whether I was able to boost their morale or not, but after seeing them, my morale was definitely boosted, to see that our men are strong, capable, and notwithstanding the harsh terrain and climate that they were facing on a daily basis, they were still cheerful and welcoming, full of smiles. Josh was high. I came back very satisfied and I felt good about our Army as a whole. We are very lucky to have in our frontline troops, hardy soldiers who are ready to brave any kind of adversity. And then it was back again to Delhi, which we reached by about 1430 hours, time enough to freshen up and off to the PM's residence at 1630 hours where I was to give a briefing to the CCS, who were surprised to see me as they were just then watching news of my visit on the TV. The visit served me in good stead as I was able to brief the CCS with more confidence

26 January Republic Day celebrations kept us busy but we convened a need-to-know basis CSG meeting at the RM's residence on Akbar Road on 27 Jan. Only the RM, EAM, NSA and COAS (myself) and from the staff side, the FS,

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Shri Shringla, the JS (East Asia), Shri Naveen Srivastava from the MEA, and the DGMO, Lt Gen Paramjit Singh Sangha from the Army were present. This mini-CSG had been necessitated by the continuing leaks to the media. The eighth round of deliberations on 6 November was known to the media on 11 November, and the ninth round outcomes of 24 January were already being speculated about in the media on 25 January itself. This had been a recurring headache and a matter of concern as it had the potential to derail the talks. On more than one occasion, the PLA had complained that even before they had had the opportunity to debrief their higher-ups, the news was already on all our TV channels. We had to repeatedly explain to the PLA that the leak was not from the Army and that we are a democracy with a free and open media, and that they would have to bear with us. I reiterated this point in the CSG meeting, adding that if it was of such critical significance, the office of the NSA had all the resources to be able to pinpoint the leak. I am sanguine that the NSA must have looked into it, because there were no more leaks after that.

We got down to discuss the details of the proposal. Was it enough now that they had accepted our baseline of status quo ante, or could we squeeze out a little more? Although the area of North and South Bank was getting resolved, PP-15 and PP-17A would remain pending. And what about the legacy issues of Depsang and Demchok? The deliberations went back and forth. I felt that it was the area of the Fingers that was uppermost in the public imagination—the images of new infrastructure, jetties, boats and above all, the outline map of China on the lakeside. Getting the PLA out of this area and to the East of Finger 8 should be the priority. The only leverage we had was our occupation of the Kailash Range. Realistically speaking, how strong was this lever? Was it strong enough

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to resolve the entire boundary issue? Obviously, no. Strong enough to also resolve legacy issues? Unlikely, as we ourselves had started with the premise of status quo of April 2020. PP-15 and PP-17? Perhaps yes. But in my opinion, this was a case of '*haathi nikal gaya, dum rahe gayi*'. The major part had been achieved and we should go with that. The PLA proposal had started with only going back to Finger 5; then back to Finger 8, but retaining fifty personnel at Finger 5; then going back beyond Finger 8 but reserving the right to patrol up to Finger 5. We had stuck to our guns and reached this stage. In trying for that last 20 per cent, we should not lose the more important 80 per cent. Ultimately, we agreed to go ahead with the proposal in its current form with the proviso that this was only a precursor to complete disengagement. This was acceptable to the Chinese side also.

The disengagement process was complex. North Bank (Step 1, Step 2, Step 3); South Bank (Step 1, Step 2, Step 3); Kailash Range (Step 1, Step 2, Step 3). These steps were to be undertaken in sequence starting with the disengagement of armour, then all the Step 1s, Step 2s and finally, the Step 3s, starting each time from the North Bank. It was a sight to behold when the tanks started up, spewing dark black smoke in the pristine air, turned their turrets towards us (which had been facing rearwards as a confidence-building measure), dipped their guns in farewell and trundled off from where they had come almost six months earlier. By evening, they had gone over 50 km to the rear as agreed to, paving the way for the other Steps. The disengagement was no less spectacular. The images of PLA troops dismantling their sangars, razing them to the ground and moving back to their garrisons in the rear were flashed on TV screens worldwide. It was the first time ever, that not only had the Chinese withdrawn but also removed their infrastructure. The disengagement, which

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commenced on 10 February, followed the laid-down Steps and was completed by 19 February. I was able to report the same to the RM who was extremely pleased and asked me to convey his compliments and best wishes to everyone who had participated in Operation Snow Leopard.

Talks continued thereafter at regular intervals, with no untoward incidents in the disengagement areas. PP-17A was settled after the twelfth round of talks held in July 2021 and disengagement was completed by 5 August.[23] The disengagement at PP-15 happened only much later, in September 2022 (after I had retired), as a result of the agreement reached in the sixteenth round of Corps Commander-level talks.[24] In hindsight, it was a wise decision to go ahead with the disengagement in the North and South Banks of the Pangong Tso. Since Parliament was in session in February, it was incumbent on us to inform Parliament first, before releasing anything to the media to avoid a breach of privilege. When and how to do this was critical. The Rajya Sabha was to meet on the 11th morning, and the Lok Sabha on the 11th evening. The RM was of the opinion that he should address the Lok Sabha first followed by the Rajya Sabha the next day. There was a proposal to inform the Parliament on the 10th itself, since the disengagement had already commenced, but we did not want it to clash with the PM's Vote of Thanks on the President's address. So, it was decided to go ahead with the 11th morning and we got around to preparing the draft for the RM. The humorous part was that while we were doing this in strict secrecy, it was the Chinese side that broke the news of the disengagement at about 1600 hours IST (on the 10th) on the *Global Times* as well as their Twitter handle. Our media houses and channels went sort of berserk, wondering how they had not come to know of it. We were inundated with a large number of calls, with ADG PI getting more than eighty calls

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from various journalists, but we just kept mum, telling everyone to wait for the RM's address scheduled for the next day. In fact, one of the media personnel, from the *Economic Times*, was actually sitting in front of me in my office when the news was breaking, that the *Global Times* had released such and such statement, and with a very straight face, I was saying that I didn't know anything of what was happening!

The RM once again addressed both the Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha as scheduled on 11th February 2021, saying, 'I am happy to inform the House today that as a result of our well-thought-out approach and sustained talks with the Chinese side, we have now been able to reach an agreement on disengagement in the North and South Bank of the Pangong Lake.'[25] We had done it—through a whole-of-nation effort with synergy at the political, diplomatic and military levels. India had approached the issue from a moral high ground, that in this day and age, there is no place for any unilateral attempt to change the status quo through the use of force. It also underscored the wisdom of our forebears, that 'Truth Alone Triumphs'.

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4.3

Break Out: Continuity and Change

In my initial address to the officers, as well as during the press conference on the eve of Army Day 2020, I touched upon certain key aspects that would guide me through my tenure as Chief. Consolidation was one of the facets. Our system being what it is, any new initiative takes time to ideate and mature into a formal proposal, which has then to be sent to the Ministry for consideration. Proposals may often require to be seen by various departments within the MoD or even require inter-ministerial consultations, before final approval and issue of a Government Sanction Letter (GSL). A proposal, initiated during the tenure of a former Chief, may materialize during the tenure of the next. Therefore, there is a requirement of maintaining continuity in policies from Chief to Chief. If that is to happen, then any new initiative must have all the Army Commanders on board, as it is through this collegiate that the next Chief(s) will be nominated. Concurrently, new initiatives, necessitated by technological changes or feedback from the environment, have to be initiated, which would in turn fructify sometime in the future. The Army is like a living organism,

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which grows and matures with each passing year, sometimes even discarding old policies that are no longer relevant.

Integrated Battle Groups

One thought that had been buzzing in my mind right from my Brigade Commander days, was our long Observe-Orient-Decide-Act (OODA) loop. In any organization, the shorter the decision-making loop the better, which can only be achieved through a flatter hierarchical organization. At the operational level, we have the Battalion HQ, Brigade HQ, Division HQ, Corps HQ and Command HQ. Far too many in my opinion. Could we not restructure ourselves to become more operationally efficient, by removing one layer in this chain of the decision-making process, through the merger of the Brigade and Divisional HQ? I had floated this idea during one of the Corps War Games, but it did not find any takers.

It is not that the current organization was wrong. It had merit at the time it was conceived when means of communication, both physical (road, rail, air) and electronic (radio, line, data) were poor. Therefore, it required HQ at regular intervals to process information, aggregate it and send it up the chain for decision-making at the Corps or Command level, before following the same chain in its downward path to convey the orders/decisions taken to those who had to execute them. With the advancements that had taken place, particularly in the electronic domain, it was now possible to expand the span of control at every level. This thought was further reinforced when I was the Chief of Staff in 33 Corps, which looked after the defence of Sikkim. Between Nathu La and Gangtok, a distance of only 30 km or so as the crow flies, were four HQs. Could this not be reduced by merging the Brigade and Division into one entity?

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Once I had settled in at ARTRAC HQ in Shimla, I put this proposal down on paper. Instead of having both Brigades and Divisions, we would have an intermediate organization, a 'Light Division'. I outlined this idea and tasked Brig Virender Vats, the BGS, to make a firm proposal.[1] Out of all the officers I had spoken to, he was possibly the first one who grasped the idea in its entirety. The Brigades would get their full complement of supporting arms and services on a permanent basis, rather than on mobilization, as is presently the case, and the Division HQ and Divisional Units would be done away with or repurposed (optimized). This would not only make the organization leaner and more operationally effective but also result in savings in manpower and the attendant recurring costs.

I presented this proposal during the Army Commanders' Conference in April 2018, using Sikkim as the tactical setting to illustrate the concept. However, three of the Army Commanders were those who had commanded either their Division or Corps in Sikkim, and they were totally opposed to this idea, terming it unpractical and compromising the defences of Sikkim. I had let it pass then, trusting their superior wisdom and knowledge of the terrain. I was not totally convinced, though. Later in the year, when I became the Army Commander, Eastern Command, I revisited this idea, for which I tasked Lt Cen CP Mohanty, the then 33 Corps Commander.[2] I gave him all the material I had from my earlier presentation, advising him that he could contact Maj Gen Virender Vats for additional inputs. Mohanty also grasped the concept immediately and felt it was absolutely doable, not only for Sikkim but for all of Eastern Command, particularly the isolated valleys in Arunachal Pradesh. He prepared a detailed presentation, reassigning units and formations as per the new concept and including an equally detailed plan showing the accretions and decrements in

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manpower at each level. This plan showed how there would be no change whatsoever in the deployment profile at Battalion or lower levels in the first and second tiers of defence. The changes would only manifest in the third tier and location and application of reserves, that too in a more effective manner. The new formulation was tested in the 33 Corps War Game held that year, and found to be superior. It found much favour at the Battalion and Brigade level; the only ones opposed to it were the Divisional Commanders, who felt they were becoming redundant.

I was convinced that this was a proposal worth taking forward. When I had first discussed it informally with Gen Bipin Rawat, he too seemed favourably inclined. Unknown to me, he was also working on a similar proposal for which the Perspective Planning Directorate (now Strategic Planning Directorate) had been tasked, the only difference being that it was being called the Integrated Battle Group (IBG), instead of Light Division. It was envisaged that each Corps, on conversion, would have five to six 'Light Divisions' instead of the traditional three Divisions to a Corps. This would imply a more than doubling of the number of Divisions, which may look alarmist. Therefore, Gen Bipin Rawat thought that a benign name in the form of IBG would be more suitable, and gave the go-ahead for taking it forward.

When I took over as Chief, I carried forward this proposal, which had the blessings of Gen Rawat, who had now become the CDS. However, Gen Rawat had opined that rather than starting with 33 Corps, which was operationally deployed, we should start with 9 Corps (defensive corps) and 17 Corps (offensive corps) as test-beds. This was also fine with me, and I tasked the PP Directorate to prepare a restructuring plan based on the framework already prepared by 33 Corps. If I

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thought this was a done deal, I was sadly mistaken. In the first set of presentations, doubts were voiced over the very concept (back two steps). Subsequently, disadvantages arising out of the restructuring and the necessity of retaining a Divisional HQ in a truncated form were suggested (back one step). I was reminded of the old saying by Capt BH Liddell Hart, a British military officer and historian, 'The only thing harder than getting a new idea into the military mind is to get an old one out.' After reaching some sort of form, when the draft was circulated to the other DGs, they were up in arms at the perceived loss of turf and gave recommendations essentially reverting to the status quo. When I had initially conceived of this scheme and as put together by Mohanty, we had reached a ballpark figure of anything between 2000–2500 personnel per Corps, who could be optimized depending on the role of the Corps. When I was given a presentation in the latter half of 2020, a grand number of 200 personnel had been reduced. Nobody was willing to let go.

The crux of the matter is that the restructuring was being looked at in isolation. The Corps was not being seen as part of a Command fighting an integrated theatre battle. Nor was the proposed organization being matched with a tactical setting as had been done in the 33 Corps War Game. The result was that everyone wanted to be self-sufficient in all respects, hence the reason for little or no decrements. When the organization was overlaid on a tactical setting, the superfluousness of certain units became evident. For example, an IBG moving to or located in the area of another IBG could easily plug in and use the same resources rather than duplicate the effort. This was particularly true for the Strike Corps who were unwilling to reconcile that the resources of the Holding Corps would be at their disposal, and hence wanted to be self-sufficient in all respects, at all times

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and phases of the battle. This rigmarole continued for almost a year, preoccupied as we were with the happenings in Eastern Ladakh. Ultimately, I had to put my foot down and give out the bottom line, up to and around which the proposal had to be finalized. This was probably the only time I raised my voice in the face of such obduracy. Fortunately for me, I had an ally in Lt Gen Mohanty, who had taken over as the VCOAS in January 2021 and was totally on board. He could then push through the changes and vet them before it was presented to me, thus saving me time.

There remained the question of obtaining Ministry approval as it constituted a policy change, including few accretions in higher ranks, since each IBG would now be commanded by a Maj Gen. Overall though, the proposal was financially beneficial, as it would result in a substantial reduction in manpower to the tune of 1500 to 2000 personnel per Corps. The proposal was forwarded to the DMA with a request to schedule a presentation for the RM in the presence of other stakeholders, especially Defence Finance, who would have to obtain the sanction of the Secretary, Finance of the Finance Ministry as per the policy in vogue.[3] Although I had briefed the RM a number of times on these ongoing efforts, a conference requiring the attendance of other Secretaries could only be convened on behalf of the RM, by the DMA. After a couple of months, we received a communication from the DMA that approval of the RM already existed for such a restructuring, even quoting the authority. This was news to me but ought to have been known to the CDS since he was the former COAS.

Explaining this concept to the environment was a Herculean effort, as everyone was seeing it as a cost-cutting exercise. I had to emphasize time and again that whatever

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we did was primarily to improve operational efficiency; everything else was secondary. There would be advantages and disadvantages, gainers and losers, but that had to be taken in its stride. The Human Resource (HR) aspect could not become the driving factor. When I pointed out that there were already a number of Independent Brigades in existence, which report directly to the Corps, the idea gradually started to sink in. Moreover, since each IBG (as also Independent Brigades) would be commanded by a Maj Gen, it would also improve the promotion prospects at this level. It was also emphasized that this transition was not going to happen overnight but as part of a deliberate process. When Mohanty and I had worked on this in Eastern Command, we had estimated that it might take a Corps up to two years to make this change. This was enough time to make mid-course corrections, if required. Since operational balance would have to be maintained, not all Corps would restructure simultaneously. Even working at an optimistic figure of two Corps per year, it would still take a decade for the change to take effect.

This might sound unbelievable at first glance but that is not so. Take the case of the PLA, who have a concept of Combined Arms Brigade (CAB), which is fundamentally the same as our IBG. The change from Division to CABs in the PLA started sometime in the early 2000s and is still ongoing. When the PLA mobilized opposite us in Eastern Ladakh, regular Divisions as well as CABs were identified. Since the changeover in our case would also take years, it would automatically allow various HR issues to be addressed. This process, being called the IBG-ization of the Indian Army, is now underway. From the time it was first ideated in 2018 to its test-bedding in 2020, to its roll-out in 2022 has been a long journey.[4] Consolidation and Change go hand in hand.

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Ceasefire with Pakistan

In November 2003, four years after the Kargil War, Pakistan and India had entered into a ceasefire agreement for areas astride the LC in J & K. The year 2002 had seen upward of 8000 ceasefire violations (CFV), which did little to promote a sense of security, so essential for prosperity and development in the region. It was hoped that this would herald a new era of peace and goodwill between the two nations. After an initial good start and strict observance for about four years, the violations recommenced in 2007 and continued showing an upward trend thereafter, with the number of CFVs reaching their pre-2003 levels by 2020, with about 400 to 450 violations every month.[5] The ceasefire was being honoured more in the breach, with small arms, mortar and artillery fire an almost daily occurrence.

The reason for the CFVs was clearly to provide covering fire to infiltrating terrorist groups. Crossing of the LC was when the terrorists were most vulnerable. Once they crossed over and reached the border villages or population centres further to the rear, they could mingle with the population and seek safe havens with local sympathizers and over ground workers (OGWs). Targeting the terrorists as they attempted to infiltrate and eliminating them ahead of the AIOS was the most preferred and tactically viable option. The full range of weapons could be used, with no fear of collateral damage. Violations were not only limited to fire assaults but also through physical raids on vulnerable border outposts. In several such instances, Border Action Teams (BATs) of the Pakistan Army comprising their SSG personnel had carried out cross-border raids, and in some cases, even severing the heads of our soldiers in the most horrific and barbarous manner. Obviously, there was no love lost on either side and units would always be thirsting for revenge.

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In the larger scheme of things, though, what were we achieving through this trans-LC firing? While we were inflicting casualties on the Pakistan Army, we too were suffering some casualties of our own. Added to that were the casualties being suffered by the locals residing in the border area and the psychological trauma that the men, women and children had to endure. There were conflicting views on whether to continue with these trans-LC operations or broker another ceasefire. When I was the Army Commander ARTRAC, I had spoken at a seminar organized by the Punjab University in February 2018, on the future of Indo–Pak relations. In my talk, while reviewing the state of relations between the two countries, I mentioned that the need of the hour was 'statesmanship, not brinkmanship', which immediately hit the headlines.[6] Some analysts even went so far as to opine that it showed a rift between Gen Bipin Rawat and his senior commanders in matters of policy. Even today, I stand by what I had said then because violence should be the last resort, the means to an end, and not the end itself.

During my interactions with the PM, the security situation in J & K, on the LC as well as the hinterland, always came up for discussion. In the hinterland, the overall law-and-order situation had improved considerably after the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019. This was not mere wishful thinking but based on facts. Cases of stone-throwing and arson, shut-downs (bandhs), civilian killings, IED blasts, etc., had all shown a declining trend. There continued to be a few terrorist attempts to disturb the peace, but these were usually foiled through joint operations by the RR and J & K police. On the LC, the situation remained the same. Trans-LC fire assaults had reached a point of diminishing returns. Another facet that had escaped attention was the recurring costs imposed

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by the CFVs. Ammunition expended had to be recouped. A back-of-the-envelope calculation showed that we were firing ammunition worth about Rs 100 crore a month without any tangible gains to show for it. Moreover, after the Uri surgical strikes, the Pakistanis had cunningly located the terrorist launch pads near or within the border villages, making it well-nigh impossible to target them without civilian casualties, which Pakistan could then use for propaganda purposes. The figures below speak for themselves.[7]

Type of Incident		2018	2019	2020
Ceasefire Violations	Incidents	2140	3479	5133
	Civilians Killed	30	18	22
	Civilians Injured	143	127	71
	Security Personnel Killed	29	19	24
	Security Personnel Injured	116	122	126
Terrorist Attacks	Incidents	614	594	244
	Civilians Killed	39	39	37
	Civilians Injured	63	188	112
	Security Personnel Killed	91	80	62
	Security Personnel Injured	238	140	106
	Terrorists Killed	257	157	221

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For the real impact of the abrogation of Article 370 to be felt, there had to be visible developments on the ground, for which a peaceful environment was a prerequisite. Villagers needed to be able to return to the border villages and carry on with

their traditional occupations of farming and animal husbandry, without the constant fear of being killed by a stray shell or bullet. Tourism, the mainstay of the economy, would flourish only if there were no terrorist incidents. Something, therefore, needed to be done. During this same period, our Commanders on ground received a few feelers during the scheduled flag meetings for some kind of a limited understanding at the local level to restrict trans-LC firings. This was responded to by saying that while not averse to such an idea, a matter of such import should be broached at the DGMO level in the telephonic talks that are held every Tuesday. These overtures were also informed to the NSA, Shri Ajit Doval. These backroom discussions continued for a while, finally culminating in an 'Understanding' to restore the ceasefire agreement of 2003. In a joint statement, India and Pakistan agreed to a 'strict observance of all agreements, understandings and cease firing along the Line of Control (LoC) and all other sectors' with effect from midnight, February 24/25. The decision was announced after discussions between the Director Generals of Military Operations (DGsMO) over the established hotline.[8]

However, it was clarified in no uncertain terms, that this applied only to firings between military post and military post. We reserved the right to fire on any suspicious movement astride the LC and in the gaps between posts. Our CI/CT posture was not compromised in any manner following the ceasefire, which was honoured and is still holding out. There was a drastic drop in the number of civilian and security forces casualties. Infiltration attempts, however, continued, but they were fewer in number and more vulnerable to detection, interception and elimination, now that they were without the covering fire traditionally given by Pakistani posts. February turned out to be a good month for us. First the disengagement

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in Eastern Ladakh on 10 February, and then the ceasefire on 24 February. Very satisfying indeed.

Rebalancing to the Northern Front

India has always faced numerous challenges to its national security, both external and internal. The external challenges, particularly on land, arise due to the unsettled nature of our borders. Thus, India faces a two-front threat, in the West from Pakistan, and in the North and North-east, from China. The Army continuously keeps reviewing the situation and re-evaluates the threat perception. It is based on this evaluation that perspective plans are chalked out and operational plans implemented. While perspective plans are formulated by the Perspective Planning Directorate, implementation falls under the Directorate General of Military Operations (DGMO), with both taking inputs from the Directorate General of Military Intelligence (DGMI).

Right from the time of Independence in 1947, the primary threat has been Pakistan, and rightly so. India had already fought three full-scale wars with Pakistan (1947–48, 1965, 1971) and a local war in Kargil (1999). In 1984, Pakistan attempted a grab action in Siachen, Western Ladakh, which was thwarted by the timely induction of forces, braving all odds. From the early 1990s, the spectre of terrorism in J & K raised its head, necessitating the deployment of forces in the Counter Insurgency and Counter Terrorism (CI/CT) role. The requirement of manning the LC in J & K, as well as the AGPL (Siachen) in strength, increased the requirement of troops. These were live borders and trans-LC firing was commonplace. The threat was such that there was no question of letting your guard down in this 'No-War, No-Peace' scenario. The majority of the Indian Army, therefore, faced Westwards.

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Over the years, the threat on the Northern Front kept increasing. In fact, as far back as 1998, the then RM, Shri George Fernandes, was the first person, breaking years of taboo, to publicly identify China as the Number 1 threat.[9] Keeping that in mind, infrastructure development and force accretions for the Northern Front were undertaken. The road network was extended albeit at a slow pace due to delays in clearances from various Ministries. Two additional Divisions (56 Inf Div and 71 Inf Div) were raised in the period 2009–12 for 3 Corps and 4 Corps respectively.[10] During this period, study groups were constituted for planning the creation of a Mountain Strike Corps, and I was a part of one such group. In July 2013, the CCS approved the creation of a Mountain Strike Corps, which resulted in the raising of 17 Corps in January 2014.[11] Yet, despite these accretions, the bias of the Army remained towards the Western Front.

Of the total of 14 x Corps, comprising some forty-odd Divisions and Independent Brigades, approximately 9 x Corps (70 per cent), and thirty-plus Divisions (75 per cent) catered for the Western Front of 3300-odd km. In comparison, only 4 x Corps (30 per cent) and only 9 x Divisions (25 per cent) catered for the more inhospitable Northern Front of over 4000 km. It was evident that the troop density was totally inadequate to meet even a low-level threat. After the Doklam crisis of 2019, some individual units, mostly artillery and air defence, were moved from the West to the East, but did this not materially affect the force ratios. The three Strike Corps (1, 2 and 21) were all earmarked for the Western Front. 17 Corps had to look after the whole of the Northern Front, from Ladakh in the North, through the Central Sector, all the way to Arunachal Pradesh in the East. This was just not practical.

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14 Corps located at Leh had two Divisions (3 Div and 8 Div), out of which only one Division i.e., 3 Mtn Div was looking after the entire front of 800-plus km from the Karakorum Pass to Mt Gya, which as events showed was totally inadequate. It is not as if Northern Command was not seized of this problem and over the years, many Army Commanders had made a bid for an additional Division for this area. Unfortunately, it never saw the light of day, probably due to the preoccupation with CI/CT operations and a 'hot' LC. There was also a perception (equally shared by me), that Northern Command was like a bottomless well, where any number of forces could be sent, never to revert. In fact, Northern Command, which used to look after only one state (now divided into the two UTs of J & K and Ladakh), has 12 x Divisions of which only one (3 Inf Div) is in Ladakh. In the Central Sector, from Mt Gya to the Nepal border, were just three independent Brigades, one in Himachal Pradesh and two in Uttarakhand, reporting directly to the Command HQ in Chandimandir and Lucknow, respectively. Eastern Command was comparatively better off, with three Divisions in each of its Corps. This also implied that the Northern Front was being looked after by four different Command HQs—Northern, Western, Central and Eastern—not an ideal situation at all.

While deliberations were ongoing to redress this imbalance, the crisis in Eastern Ladakh occurred and served as a catalyst for the rebalancing plans. A large number of troops had already been inducted into Eastern Ladakh to deal with the situation; there was now a requirement of providing one more HQ for effective Command and Control, for which CIF(U) along with two of its Sectors (Brigades) was chosen since that area (Udhampur) was relatively dormant. In the Central Sector, each of the Independent Brigades had no reserves, operating as they were in isolated sub-sectors. 14 Div

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of Western Command was reassigned to the Central Sector so that each of its three Brigades could be the *ab initio* reserve for one sub-sector each. If the Sector was to remain dormant, this Division was available to Central Command, thus giving them some offensive capability, which they were devoid of earlier. Additionally, all three sub-sectors were put under Central Command, thus freeing up Western Command to look Westwards only. 1 Corps, part of South Western Command was divested of its Armoured Division and de facto converted into another Mountain Strike Corps for the Northern and Central Sectors but under the operational control of Northern Command. 17 Corps, which only had 59 Infantry Division on its Order of Battle (ORBAT) was allotted 23 Infantry Division of 12 Corps. These changes meant that there were now five additional Divisions earmarked for the Northern Front. Overall, we now had 8 x Corps (57 per cent) looking to the West and 6 x Corps equivalent (43 per cent) looking Northwards, a much more balanced disposition.

Needless to say, the other Commands were not too happy with this reduction in their combat potential. The worst affected was South Western Command, which had also seen some decrements in the wake of the Doklam crisis. Some individual armoured and artillery units that had been inducted into Eastern Ladakh from Western, South Western and Southern Commands were permanently reassigned and put on the ORBAT of 14 Corps/Northern Command. Notable among these was the induction of K-9 Vajra, self-propelled guns into Eastern Ladakh. Five Regiments of K-9 Vajra had been acquired to provide fire support to armoured columns due to their matching mobility for deployment in the plains/desert areas. Moving these to the mountains was an out-of-the-box idea. Initially, only a battery of six guns was sent on

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a trial basis. The guns were found to be suitable, only needing a few modifications to cater for the high altitude and rarefied atmosphere. I had a word with Mr JD Patil, the MD of L&T Defence, who readily agreed to carry out these modifications at no cost. The upshot was that two Regiments were inducted into the Sector and an order for 100 more guns was placed. This was the advantage of having an indigenous weapons system, on which modifications could be carried out without reference to any foreign vendor. However, apart from these exceptions, the rebalancing was mainly in terms of a change of roles. There was little or no physical relocation as such. Most of these formations were earlier earmarked for the Western Front and dual-tasked for the Eastern Front. Now, the roles had been reversed. Should a contingency arise, they would still be available to deal with a threat from Pakistan, which was now at a lower priority. Periodic re-evaluations of the threat perception would continue in the future and readjustments carried out as necessary.

Though still inadequate, the increase in force ratios on the Northern Front will definitely make the PLA think twice before embarking on any misadventure, especially now that we have the offensive capability to take the battle into Chinese territory. In our posture against China, we have moved up from dissuasive deterrence (defensive) to credible deterrence (offensive defence). With these developments, the PLA must have realized that a military solution to the border problem is improbable. The time is thus ripe for a resumption of the SR-level talks to settle the border question.[12] Pending the settlement of the boundary dispute, which is likely to be time-consuming, articulation of a 'non-aggression' pact between the two countries would go a long way in restoring confidence, paving the way for de-escalation and de-induction of forces

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from Tibet/Ladakh. Such a pact would be somewhat akin to what China and the ASEAN countries are attempting to formalize.[13]

Theatre Commands

Gen Bipin Rawat was appointed as India's first-ever Chief of Defence Staff with effect from 1 January 2020, on completion of a three-year tenure as COAS. As part of the government orders, a Department of Military Affairs was also created, with Gen Rawat also being the Secretary, DMA. In his capacity of CDS, he also became the permanent Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC), which hitherto had been a rotating appointment, held by the senior-most Service Chief for the balance of his tenure. Gen Rawat (and his successor Gen Anil Chauhan) thus wore three hats, Chairman COSC, CDS and Secy DMA. The mandate of the Department of Military Affairs inter alia included, 'Facilitation of restructuring of Military Commands for optimal utilization of resources by bringing about jointness in operations, including through the establishment of joint/theatre commands'.[14] The emphasis on this aspect in the government notification seemed to suggest that this was the priority. Perhaps as a result of this perception, Gen Rawat outlined a model that was more in the nature of loud thinking, which nevertheless led to a spate of vociferous protestations, especially from the Air Force.

The CDS felt that there could be four to five theatres: two operational theatres for the land borders, two operational theatres for the maritime borders and one functional air defence theatre command. These were to be formed by merging the existing operational Commands of the three Services: six of the Army, two of the Navy and five of the Air Force.[15] The

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existing tri-service Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) was to be subsumed in any one of the maritime theatres. The overall rationale was 'One Theatre—One Threat'. However, within the land theatres, Northern Command was temporarily kept out due to the ongoing CI/CT situation and live LC and LAC, besides the fact that it faces both Pakistan and China. Reports circulating that this 'Theaterization' had to be completed within two years gave a false sense of urgency. Just evolving from Divisions and Brigades to IBGs had taken five years from ideation to roll-out. To expect Theaterization in two years was unrealistic. Even if a proposal acceptable to the three Services were to get prepared in two years, it would have been a great achievement. The burden of expectations was actually an impediment.

This proclamation by the CDS and the formulation suggested did not find favour with all. Gen Rawat had discussed these formulations with me, as I am sure he would have done with the other two Chiefs. I was okay with it although I pointed out that keeping Northern Command temporarily out of the picture would complicate matters pertaining to jointness. At least for planning purposes, we should go in for two theatres, a Land Theatre Command (West) facing Pakistan, and a Land Theatre Command (North) facing China. Northern Command of necessity would get split into two, with the J & K portion going to LTC (W) and Ladakh to LTC (N). The Navy felt that the entire maritime domain should be one only, and rather than Peninsular Command, which they felt gave it a continental tinge, they wanted it to be called the Maritime Theatre Command. The Air Force felt that they were being left out and wanted an operational Air Defence Theatre Command. These observations stemmed more from a preconceived notion that the Land Theatre would go to the Army, Maritime to the Navy and Air

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Defence to the Air Force. Once again, rather than operational considerations, HR issues came to the fore and started becoming the hidden agenda behind any recommendations. To really be able to arrive at a pragmatic model, we need to divorce the Theatre Command from the Theatre Commander. The Theatre Commander will be appointed by the government, from the available tri-service pool of officers, over which the Services would have no jurisdiction. The same is the case for the appointment of the CDS, who could be from any Service. To legislate that these appointments should be rotational among the Services or in any particular ratio just amounts to wanting to protect one's turf.

As far as the Army was concerned, the plan was to nominate HQ South Western Command to become the LTC (W) with the Western and Southern Commands under it. The operational area of SWC would be divided between WC and SC. HQ Central Command was nominated as LTC (N) with the Central Sector and Eastern Command under it. Northern Command was left out for the time being. Accordingly, the two Army Commanders, Lt Gen AS Bhinder and Lt Gen Yogendra Dimri were tasked to carry this plan forward and suggest an organogram for their respective theatres. This they did and presented their models to the MO Dte. It became immediately obvious that each Theatre would have to be tailor-made to suit its role and peculiar terrain and climatic conditions. Therefore, it was equally obvious that the role and area of responsibility of the proposed Theatres first needed to be spelt out and only then could an assessment of forces required to carry out that role be arrived at. In the Ends-Ways-Means construct, the Theatre Commander must know what are the Means (forces) at his disposal, before considering the Ways of how to apply them, in order to achieve the Ends set out for the Theatre. This

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implies that there has to be a permanent ab initio affiliation or grouping of forces to each Theatre, be it in terms of Divisions (Army), Ships (Navy) or Squadrons (Air Force). It is over this fundamental issue that the Theaterization process stalled.

Another aspect that had to be considered was one of operational command and control. For the Army, it ran from the Corps through the Command to Army HQ. The creation of Theatre Commands would effectively mean adding one more link in the chain. At a time when we were trying to shorten the OODA loop below the Corps level by creating IBGs, this seemed counter-intuitive. Two channels of command and control would be required, an operational channel and an administrative channel. The operational channel would follow the Corps–Theatre–COCS route, while the administrative channel would follow the Corps–Command–Army HQ route. In due course of time, the Service HQ would only discharge the Raise–Train–Sustain functions and have an operational role only through the COSC, with the CDS as its permanent chair. The COSC would be in a position to assess emerging threats and re-prioritize the allocation of resources to the Theatres. There was no getting away from the fact that an ab initio allocation of resources to Theatres was an operational imperative. The lessons learnt from the Malayan Campaign and the Fall of Singapore in World War II are both illuminating and instructive, wherein the promised forces never arrived.[16]

A third aspect which was equally important was what happens to the hinterland, which is looked after by the Sub Areas and Area HQ of the Army. What about the secondary role of Internal Security and Aid to Civil Authorities during natural calamities? In the existing set-up, the Area HQ and the Corps HQ both report to the Regional Command, which carries out the necessary coordination. With the creation of Theatre

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Commands, who would be responsible for this coordination? As such, the Area HQ does not have any troops under command and has to bank on the forces given to it from the Corps as per SOP. This issue is particularly important since as per the Cantonment Act, it is the Army Commander in whom all authority rests.[17] This was particularly relevant in the context of the Maritime Theatre Command (MTC), which would have the whole of peninsular India to look after, but with the authority in respect of Cantonments resting with the Army Commander, Southern Command, who would become part of the LTC (W). There were neither any clear-cut options nor discrete solutions. Each and every aspect would have to be brainstormed time and again and the possible models refined with every iteration.

When Gen Rawat had first mentioned an Air Defence Command, he had thought of it as a functional command which would involve the merger of Raise–Train–Sustain functions of the Army and Air Force ground-based AD systems, of which the majority were with the Army. At first sight, it appeared eminently doable, which is what prompted him to give out an ambitious timeline. Later, the Air Force felt that AD Command should also have an operational role. This, in turn, would imply the allocation of air assets separately for this role, which went against their very philosophy. Ultimately, the Air Force felt that an AD Command was not required at all, whether functional or operational. Almost a year was lost in the bargain.

The Army model was presented in one of the DMA meetings in the second half of 2020. Although inputs had been sought from the Air Force, these had not been forthcoming and accordingly, the Army model presented was based on general knowledge. This model was objected to by the Air Force, who said they had not been consulted. Catch-22. Having said that, they were now obliged to share the required information.

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Internally too, the IAF was concerned that it would be 'eclipsed' by the much larger Indian Army in the ITCs, or worse, relegated into operating—as General Rawat had declared—as the Army's 'back-up or supplementary force'.[18] In fact, at one stage, even the use of the word 'integrated' was debated, so intense were the deliberations. As a way out of the impasse, I suggested that we needed to test the efficacy of the model through the medium of a war game, and this would only be successful if all the Services sent their representatives of sufficient seniority. Accordingly, HQ SWC was tasked to conduct the same at a convenient time and place.

SWC held a joint Theatre-Level War Game based on a tactical scenario of the Western Front. It was attended by all the Army Commanders facing the Western Front, as well as Army Commander Central Command along with their senior staff officers. From the Army HQ, the DGMO and DG PP attended on all days, while I went on the last day and a half. The Navy sent a comparatively junior officer, understandably so, more as an observer than a participant as they had little or no operational role as part of LTC (W). From the Air Force side, apart from the Air Force officers who are integral to the Command and Corps HQ, only the AD Cdrs of WAC and SWAC were present, as was the AOC-in-C, WAC. Lt Gen Bhinder had conducted the war game in a most professional and visionary manner, wearing the hat of a 'Theatre Commander', and I must say that the role suited him. Among the outcomes, it once again emerged that a Theatre needed to be self-contained in all respects, with all resources integral to its ORBAT. Some reserves or critical high-value assets could be retained centrally to be released on the directions of the COSC. For example, the Armoured Division of 1 Corps (reassigned to Northern Command less its Armoured Division) could become

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an Army HQ reserve. By harvesting one or two Divisions from dormant sectors, a Strike Corps could be recreated and allotted to the LTC (W), should the need arise. A similar arrangement could be worked out for critical and high-value air assets, such as the AWACS or mid-air refuellers. The workhorses though, the front-line squadrons had to be integral to the Theatre, the very *raison d'être* for the term 'Integrated Theatre Command'. The recommendations of the war game, including integrated verticals with cross-staffing of appointments, did not find favour with the Air Force, which insisted on a service-specific model. Similarly, placing the Theatre air space under the Theatre Commander was also not agreed to by the Air Force.[19] Nevertheless, these recommendations were forwarded to the CDS and once again tabled in the DMA in the presence of all Service Chiefs and Principal Staff Officers (PSO). Once again, the Air Force was not in favour of apportioning resources, arguing that dispersing resources thinly over the respective Theatres would considerably diminish its operational philosophy of using their assets in interchangeable strategic and tactical roles, through centralized planning at the Air HQ level and decentralized execution by the concerned Air Bases. This seemed to suggest that all intermediate links were redundant, which then begged the question: Why the requirement of an AOC-in-C?

Regardless, we were making some progress and the CDS had drawn up a road map, which entailed formalizing of structures and the organogram by the end of 2021, obtaining 'in-principle' of the CCS for the proposed ITC by April 2022, test-bedding the same, making mid-course corrections and then getting final approval by end-2022. Unfortunately, due to the tragic crash of 8 December 2021, there was no further progress on this 'Front' and it is now for the current CDS to take Theaterization forward.

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Rightsizing or Downsizing

Whenever we think of rightsizing, we always think in terms of some drastic reduction from somewhere. However, there is no such magic wand, where suddenly 50,000 troops are reduced in one fell swoop. There are, however, many areas that simple housekeeping can address, resulting in small savings that, when applied across the Army, still result in savings in manpower, without in any way compromising operational effectiveness. Many of the structures and organizations that were born out of necessity at a certain point in time were now redundant. Take the Military Farms, for example, which supplied fresh milk to Army garrisons. At some point in time, it was a necessity in the absence of adequate storage and refrigeration facilities. But times had changed, milk was available in every corner kirana shop or supplied in Tetra Packs. Quite rightly, the Shekatkar Committee, which was constituted to examine reforms in the MoD, recommended its closure and this has been implemented.

One aspect that had caught my attention from my Phulbari (Brigade) days, ever since Isha had looked at me incredulously was the continued necessity of having mules. Times had changed, even in the forty years that I had been in service. Almost all the posts, where we had to walk up earlier, were now connected by road. Whenever I used to visit units, I would always ask them how they had been utilizing the mules allotted to them. In most cases, the answer was that the mules were there but used only in emergencies. Whether used or not, the mules had to be watered and fed, and proper stables catered for, with their dedicated handlers. This was quite the underutilization of resources and wasteful expenditure. Moreover, with the advent of drones, even called 'mule-drones', which could carry loads of 20 to 30 kg, clearly the days of Animal Transport were over.

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We had some 6000 mules in service in the forward areas and about half that number in reserve in various depots. As a first step, I immediately ordered a halt to any new breeding of mules. The next step was to gradually reduce the number of mules or relocate them to areas where the maintenance cost would be lower. With a lifespan of anywhere between thirty to forty years, it would still take us two decades-plus till the last mule was 'retired'. Till then, this wasteful expenditure and burden on the revenue budget will continue. A much faster way would be to give them gratis to various states and establishments, the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board for example, who might find better use for them. I give this example only to highlight that there could be many such areas where interior economy can be exercised, but the catalyst for that must come from within. Even if five to ten men (1 per cent) are reduced from each unit, it would amount to a considerable reduction in the overall strength of the Army. There is no magic wand.

Restructuring of Army HQ

The Army HQ is a complex organization and only after having served for at least one tenure in Delhi does one begin the understand the complexities. The HQ itself is in two parts, the majority of the Directorates (Dtes) being in Sena Bhawan, with a few in South Block, primarily those requiring more interaction with the Ministry. There are also strange combinations, e.g., the MI Dte is mostly in Sena Bhawan, but the DGMI sits in South Block. There are many other offices scattered all over, in the hutments around North and South Block (built during WWII—these have been vacated and relocated to KG Marg and Africa Avenue as part of the Central Vista redevelopment plan) as well as other parts of Delhi, including in RK Puram

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and Delhi Cantt. But more than the physical location of the Dtes, the real issue was of their functioning and inter-Dte coordination.

The Chief has a number of Principal Staff Officers of the rank of Lt Gen to assist him, starting with the VCOAS and two DCOAS. The other PSOs are the DGMO, DGMI, DGMT, AG, QMG, MGO, MS, Engineer-in-Chief and Signals Officer-in-Chief. When I took over as Chief, there were two DCOAS, a DCOAS (IS&T) looking after Information Systems and Training, and a DCOAS (MP&S) for Manpower, Planning and Services. Apart from the DGMO and DGMI who reported directly to the VCOAS/COAS, all the other PSOs reported to one or the other of the DCOAS. Thus, for example, while the DGMT reported to the DCOAS (IS&T), the AG reported to the DCOAS (MP&S).[20] This was also the organization at the time of the Doklam crisis of 2017 when Gen Bipin Rawat was the Chief.

In responding to the crisis, Gen Rawat realized that the Dtes seemed to be working in isolation. The DGMO and DGMI, for example, would often have different inputs or even different interpretations of the same input. The DGPP, responsible for Perspective Planning and drawing up the LTPP based on which future acquisitions towards capability-building are made, reported to the DCOAS (IS&T). The MGO, responsible for the sustenance of the force and capabilities built up, however, reported to the DCOAS (MP&S). It was not an ideal situation, with the result that the Chief was not getting a composite picture, or 'completed staff work' as it is known in Army parlance. Accordingly, Gen Rawat tasked the then DGFP, Lt Gen Ajai Singh to work on a new model to streamline the working of the various Dtes.[21] Ajai set to work and made a number of models, taking inputs from the various PSOs

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and DGs of Line Dtes, stepping on a few toes in the bargain. Once again, there was opposition to change, and no model was ideal, each having its own advantages and disadvantages. By the time it was presented to us Army Commanders during the Army Commanders' Conference in April 2018, it was already on iteration Model 14A. I was then the Army Commander ARTRAC, and the changes being proposed would significantly and positively impact the ARTRAC. Interestingly, the then CNS, Admiral Lamba, had visited HQ ARTRAC in 2018. During our interaction, he had asked me a very pertinent question, that since there was an ARTRAC looking after all issues concerning training, what was the role of the DGMT and did it not amount to duplication of effort? I was able to honestly respond that indeed what he had observed was correct and that this was precisely one of the issues being dealt with in the restructuring of the Army HQ.

One of the major changes contemplated was the creation of the appointment of a third DCOAS, a DCOAS (Strategy), to whom the DGMO, DGMI and DGPP would report. This was an operational imperative to ensure that the inputs being received through different channels could be filtered and analysed at a single point and only then presented to the Chief. I remembered my experience from my PP Dte days, when I had analysed that the PLA had reduced the number of their Group Armies (equivalent to our Corps) from twenty-one to nineteen, which had been pooh-poohed by both the MO and MI Dtes, but which later turned out to be true. The MI even went as far as to say that they had even checked with the resident DA, China, who had negated this reduction. Therefore, the long-term assessments of the PP Dte had to be balanced against the short-term inputs of the MI, before being matched against activities on both sides of the border being reported to the MO Dte in

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the daily situation reports. Often, the MO Dte would be so embroiled in the day-to-day operations, that it would lose sight of the bigger picture.

The other major change was to bring the functions of Capability Development and Sustenance under one DCOAS, by shuffling of responsibilities. Thus DCOAS (P&S) was rechristened as DCOAS (CD&S). This became a very important appointment as all new capital acquisitions from the capital budget, as well as all maintenance and operation requirements from the revenue budget, were now being coordinated by one person. The MGO became the MGS, reporting to the DCOAS (CD&S). There were other changes too, including the optimization of the MT Dte and the merger of its balance elements with the ARTRAC. There was also a thought of merging all the HR functions under one vertical, officers being dealt with by the MS Branch and JCOs/OR being dealt with by the AGs Branch, but that was discarded early on, being impractical. It was also felt that at the level of the Army HQ, value addition could better be done by officers with sufficient seniority and experience, and thus a number of appointments at the Grade 1 (Lt Col) and Grade 2 (Maj) level were reduced, with the aim that these relatively junior officers would then be available for posting to units, who were facing officer shortages as it is. For greater transparency and probity, two additional appointments were created, an ADG (Vigilance) to report directly to the COAS and an ADG (Human Rights) reporting to the VCOAS. These deliberations within the Army HQ continued and it was not until the first half of 2019 that the proposal was first sent to the Ministry for the in-principle approval of the RM, which was granted in July 2019.[22]

The proposal had now to run the bureaucratic gauntlet for the issue of a formal GSL. With the appointment of Gen Rawat

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as the CDS and Secretary DMA, we thought this would be an easy process, especially since the restructuring was Gen Rawat's idea. However, that was not to be. Since the restructuring involved the creation and re-designation of appointments at the JS (Maj Gen) and above level, it had to go for clearance to the Ministry of Finance as per policy in vogue.[23] The new structure was not only financially neutral but even financially beneficial, yet it had to be supported by copious amounts of paperwork. There were some hiccups, as there are bound to be in the implementation of any new policy or process. Some of the DGs were unhappy with having to work under officers junior to them in service; others for losing the PSO tag. The DGMT position was optimized to make way for the new appointment of the DCOAS (Strat). Although we tried our best, through the latter half of 2019 and early 2020, to push the case through, when the crisis began in Eastern Ladakh in May 2020, almost three years after the Doklam crisis of 2017, we were still operating under the old system. It would not do wait indefinitely for the process to take its own sweet time. I pointed out to the RM that an operationally required and financially neutral proposal was being stymied by bureaucratic hurdles and that we could wait no longer. In this, I had the full support and backing of the CDS. Accordingly, in September 2020, I ordered a 'soft launch' of the new establishment. Designations and offices would remain the same, but all Dtes and Branches would start working as per the new charter and organization and route their files accordingly. This was to prove to be of great benefit, particularly when Emergency Power was delegated to the Service HQ, because now the DCOAS (CD&S) could prioritize and balance out both the capital acquisition and sustenance requirement. Lt Gen Paramjit Singh Sangha, the

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DGMO, became the 'new' DCOAS (Strat) in addition to his duties as DGMO.

As we went along, many requests were received for either reverting to the old system or retaining some of the appointments that had been optimized. All these requests were noted but turned down. I explained to all the PSOs that we had to first give the new system a chance to stabilize and not keep making changes in isolation as it would have a domino effect. Accepting the change for one Branch or Dte would lead to similar claims from other Dtes and we would soon be back where we had started from. Accordingly, a ban was placed for one year to allow the system to get going. However, all Dtes were told to keep sending their feedback to the DGSD, who would keep compiling these requests, which would then be considered holistically after the one-year period was over. As I had hoped, once everyone started working in the new verticals and saw the benefits that were accruing, the resistance to change weakened. In a large organization like the Army, management of the change is as important as the change itself. We kept pursuing our case for the GSL, answering observations as and when they were raised but no longer getting perturbed by them, as we were already working as per the organization. In fact, we had got quite used to the new system and designations by the time formal sanction was finally received in December 2020.[24] If something good has to be done, it has to be done and let the devil take the hindmost.

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4.4

Reorganization

Apart from operational issues, several administrative issues had to be addressed concurrently. All these had to be carried out under the Covid overhang and through the Ladakh crisis. Operations are part and parcel of Army life and were ongoing, not only in Ladakh but in J & K and the North-east, particularly on the borders with Myanmar. Yet, administrative aspects have to be taken care of, to keep the organization ticking. Postings, promotions, redress of grievances, ceremonials and welfare, disciplinary and vigilance cases, supplies and transport, cantonments and land cases—a hundred different things are happening on a daily basis. It required great flexibility of mind to shift gears from one subject to another. The first briefing of the day would be of the DGMO giving an update ranging from infiltration attempts in J & K to refugee influx in Mizoram. The next could be on hospital admissions and Covid-related information; the next about cadets misbehaving in OTA, Chennai, and so on. Every PSO got a half-hour slot to discuss his cases and get my directions. And so, the days and weeks progressed, and before you knew it, a year had passed.

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The Agnipath Scheme

When I had first sounded out the PM about the Tour of Duty scheme, it was more on the lines of a short-service option at the soldier level, similar to the Short Service Commission scheme for officers that was already in vogue. Just as a limited number of SSC officers are taken each year, likewise a limited number of jawans would be similarly enrolled and released after the completion of their 'tour' with the option of re-enlisting for another tour, if found to be fit. The terms and conditions of service in terms of pay and allowances would be the same for everyone, as in the case of SSC officers with respect to their Permanently Commissioned counterparts. Since the SSC Officers scheme already existed, it would require only a little bit of tweaking to be introduced as a Short Service Enrolment scheme for other ranks, purely for the Army.

Nothing much happened in the next couple of months as the onset of the Covid pandemic grabbed all our attention, followed by the clashes in Galwan. However, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) was considering this proposal but with a much wider scope and applicability. In the PMO formulation, not only should the complete intake of the year be short-service based, but it would also apply to all three Services. Having become a tri-service matter, it now fell on the CDS, Gen Bipin Rawat, to take the proposal forward, albeit with the Army remaining the lead service. We in the Army were taken by surprise by this turn of events, but for the Navy and Air Force, it came like a bolt from the blue. It took me some time to explain to the other Chiefs that my proposal had only been Army-centric and that I was equally surprised by these developments, and it took them some time to reconcile with the fact that they were very much part of the new proposal, dubbed the 'Agnipath' (Walk

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of Fire) Scheme by the PMO, with the soldiers, sailors and airmen recruited under this scheme to be known as 'Agniveers' (Fire Warriors). The implication being that these are the young men and women who have been tested under the toughest of conditions and are ready to face all challenges in the service of the nation.

The AG's Branch under Lt Gen Arvind Datta and later Lt Gen Harsha Gupta, ably assisted by Brig (now Maj Gen) Shehrawat, came up with a number of models to implement the scheme. The first issue to be addressed was the issue of retention. We felt that it should be 75 per cent retention and 25 per cent released, the DMA felt it should be 50–50 per cent, with the term being five years. This was the model that was presented by the CDS to a full panel comprising the PM, Ministers of Home, Defence and Finance, NSA, Service Chiefs, PS to the PM and the Secretaries of the relevant departments in November 2020. In fact, it was during this meeting that the terms 'Agnipath' and 'Agniveer' were used for the first time. Assuming an intake of 50,000 soldiers each year, then after each 'tour', 25,000 soldiers would revert to civil society. It was felt that this was too little to bring about any significant change in the population, since one of the aims of the scheme was to give back to society disciplined manpower, who would be in a position to contribute much more in the workplace due to the values and ethos they would have imbibed while in Service. The percentages therefore got reversed, with only 25 per cent to be retained and 75 per cent released. It was back to the drawing board.

As the discussion progressed, the next issue that came up was the modalities for retention. It was taken for granted that this would be like the SSC scheme, with the retention or release after the contracted period of five years. On this account, the PMO view was that there should be a two-step retention

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process; 50 per cent after three years and another 25 per cent after five years, effectively making it only 25 per cent retention. This was just not practical. Six to eight months would go into basic training and deployment, and the process for the selection of personnel to be released would also take about six months, meaning that any given jawan would be effective for just about two years. There were also practical issues to be considered: Who would do this evaluation and on what basis? For Officers, it was on the basis of their Annual Confidential Reports (ACR), but annual reports are not initiated below the NCO level. What then, would be the objective parameters for testing and who would do the testing? The Commanding Officer of the unit or a centralized Board of Officers? Even if such a board were to be constituted, would it be at the Brigade or Division level, and how would they carry out their task? By assembling all the affected personnel in one place for screening or based on the CO's recommendations? Would the cohort be seen as one or would it be arm and service-wise? If seen as one, then some jawans who had served in field would get released while those in peace stations would be retained, which would be a travesty. In a 3-plus-2 format, the retention process would become one long and never-ending exercise, which would adversely affect other tasks. These deliberations would continue for long. The problem was even more for the Air Force, for whom three years was just not enough to impart the technical skills required to carry out repairs or periodic operating and maintenance tasks on high-value platforms like aircraft, where at least a year and a half was required to impart the necessary technical skills, leaving very little residual service. Ultimately, a middle path was agreed upon, a one-step retention after four years of service.

As per the Army proposal, all the personnel were to be recruited with the same terms and conditions of service,

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except for the tenure. This was again as per the rules for SSC Officers. There were no differences in the emoluments or other perquisites. The entitlements were absolutely the same. Here again, some differences were brought in. There was the concept of an all-inclusive salary, with fixed yearly increments. The first year's starting salary was kept at just Rs 20,000 per month, all-inclusive, which would have been the same as the daily wage rate for labour (who were also entitled to Dearness Allowance).[1] This was just not acceptable. Here, we were talking about a trained soldier, who was expected to lay down his life for the country. Surely a soldier could not be compared with a daily wage labourer? Based on our very strong recommendations, this was later raised to Rs 30,000 per month. Next came the issue of allowances, which was being denied. Once again, it had to be pointed out that risk and hardship allowances would have to be given. How could you have two persons on board a ship or in a bunker on the border, one getting field area allowance and the other not?[2] Sometimes, one got the feeling that these recommendations were being made with little thought to the repercussions. The same was the case with other allowances that are not part of the basic salary. How was the soldier expected to survive if he had to pay out of his own pocket for the upkeep of uniform and other such sundry expenses? Moreover, this person could be the primary wage earner for his family. Having joined the Services, he would have the added responsibility of looking after the home front; aged parents perhaps or getting a sister married. The human angle was being lost sight of.

Furthermore, the entire amount would not be paid to the Agniveers. 25 per cent of the pay would be compulsorily deducted and put in a savings fund with a matching contribution from the government. This amount, along with interest thereon, would then be given as a payout to those Agniveers released

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from service. For those who were being retained in service, the payout amount would be merged with their new provident fund account. This was a key feature of the scheme as the payout after four years of service would come to about Rs 10 lakh-plus. An Agniveer who had joined at, say, eighteen years of age, would have a cool Rs 10 lakh in his pocket, much more than any other twenty-one-year-old could ever hope for. This he would be able to use for starting a business or higher education or whatever. The only concern was that he should not fritter away his hard-earned money. Those personnel being retained were to count their service afresh from the bottom of the ladder. This, it was pointed out, would not stand legal scrutiny. After serving for four years in an organization and then continuing in the same organization, how could that person draw a lower salary in the fifth year? In fact, it would result in the anomalous situation of the short-service Agniveer in the fourth year of service getting more pay than the permanently absorbed Agniveer now in the fifth year. This issue was resolved by saying that while he would be counted as being in the first year of service, the last drawn pay would be protected. Why complicate matters? This would then lead to another situation where this person would now have to serve a full fifteen years more to become eligible for pension, rather than only eleven years more. If one of the aims of the Agnipath scheme was to lower the age profile of the Army, then this was a retrograde step, as instead of retiring at thirty-three years of age, the jawan would now retire at thirty-seven years. The policy of giving ante-date seniority is well established and good in law. As and when this aspect rears its head sometime in the future, I am sure that mid-course corrections will be carried out to avoid unnecessary litigation.

The issue of lateral induction, i.e. the side-stepping of service personnel being released into the other Central Armed Police

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Forces (CAPF) and Ministries, commensurate to their rank and service, also came up for discussion but was turned down every time. We had proposed that 10 per cent of the Agniveers being demobilized be absorbed into various organizations and Ministries. This issue was not new, having even been part of the Seventh Central Pay Commission recommendations.[3] On each occasion, it had been turned down for some specious reason or the other. This time around, it was stated that the ethos of the Armed Forces and paramilitary forces, other CAPF and even the State police forces was different, and hence the Agniveers would not be suitable for lateral induction. On the one hand, these were supposed to be the youth who had negotiated the 'Agnipath' in the service of the nation, and now suddenly they were 'unsuitable'. Obviously, vested interests were at play. Our recommendations did not find favour and the scheme was announced without any mention of lateral induction. In the uproar that followed after the announcement of the scheme, one of the first amendments that was made, barely four days later on 18 June 2022, was the reservation of 10 per cent vacancies in the CAPFs and Assam Rifles for Agniveers.[4] Sometimes, it is good to listen to the advice of the Service Chiefs. This is, unfortunately, not the end of the story. Reports are now coming out that the Agniveers will have to undergo fresh entrance tests and will be absorbed only if they clear these tests.[5] Entrance test? For someone who was selected in the first instance through the most rigorous process and with four years of service under his belt? Obviously, grounds are now being prepared on how to get out of this *jhamela* of lateral induction.

There were countless meetings at different levels to thrash out points of divergence. While we were able to prevail on most, we had to concede ground on others, especially on the issue of retention percentages. Win some, lose some. On

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balance though, there is nothing intrinsically wrong about the Agnipath Scheme, which was announced on 14 June 2022 by the RM, with the Chiefs in attendance.[6] HR policies are always reviewed periodically and are subject to change. The announcement of the scheme generated some vociferous debates. I was approached by a number of persons and TV channels to give out my views. To each one, I replied that the Chief, General Manoj Pande, was more than competent to respond to any queries, and my stepping in would seem like a calling-in of reinforcements. I also reminded all the media persons of my intention, which I had conveyed to them on my retirement, that I would not give my comments or interviews on any service matter for six months post-retirement. I stuck to my promise and the media, too, respected my wishes. However, I did write an article on the Agniveer scheme sometime later, after the dust of the initial announcement had settled down, highlighting the advantages of the scheme and what more needed to be done, which was published in *The Hindu* in November 2022.[7]

Gender Equality

On 17 February 2020, the Supreme Court of India passed its final judgment on the case *The Secretary, Ministry of Defence v. Ms Babita Puniya & Ors*, on the subject of grant of Permanent Commission (PC) to Women Officers, ruling in favour of the respondents (women officers), bringing the curtain down on a case that had lingered on for seventeen years. In February 2003, Babita Puniya, an advocate, instituted a writ petition in the nature of a public interest litigation before the Delhi High Court for the grant of PC to women SSC Officers in the Army.[8] The Union of India was represented by R Balasubramanian,

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learned Senior Counsel, with Meenakshi Lekhi representing the respondents.

I am not delving into the merits of the case except to say that the Union of India was ill-advised to keep fighting a case which, in my opinion, had no *locus standi*. In the twenty-first century, to argue that women are the 'fairer sex' and need to be handled with kid gloves was just not aligned with today's time and age. The arguments offered in Court smacked of a paternalistic and feudal attitude. Statements like 'men will not accept orders from women', or that 'safety of women cannot be guaranteed in an all-male environment', were not only misleading but an insult to the character qualities of our men. If we, the Indian Army, could not guarantee the safety and honour of our women, how were we going to guarantee the safety and honour of 'Mother India'? Even while accepting some of the suggestions of the Court towards a speedy resolution of the case, it would be done reluctantly and by inserting some other restrictive clause, some *ghundi* (caveat), that would lead to further litigation.

The challenge was how to implement the orders of the Supreme Court. So many changes had taken place in the intervening years that it was difficult to make any policy (towards implementation of the judgment) that would satisfy all conditions and all affected women officers. I had met Meenakshi Lekhi as GOC Delhi Area, when Ms Lekhi had called on me in my office.[9] Over a cup of tea, we exchanged views on several issues, including this case. With that meeting at the back of my mind, I thought that consulting her over the way forward would be the most practical option. Once the dust had settled down and we had time to analyse the judgment in detail, I asked my MS, Lt Gen Rajeev Sirohi, to schedule a meeting, to which Ms Lekhi readily agreed. We discussed the manner in which we should go forward and how to avoid likely pitfalls.

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Ms Lekhi also had a very telling observation. This case, she said, had created a divide between the women officers and the 'Establishment', an 'us versus them' feeling, which needed to be smoothened out. I felt that this was a very pertinent observation and then and there decided that we would introduce a First Day Cover (FDC) to mark this momentous judgment. Accordingly, on Army Day 2021, an FDC was indeed released jointly by a few women officers, Meenakshi Lekhi, myself and a few other PSOs, as an expression of good faith to let bygones be bygones and to make a new beginning.

In order to implement the Court order, a fresh draft order would have to be prepared, incorporating all the directions of the Court, for obtaining Government Sanction, without which it would not be possible to go ahead. Due to the passage of time, there were sub-categories of officers. This included those who had crossed twenty years of service and thus were already entitled to pension and those between fourteen and nineteen years of service who would have to be considered for grant of PC. Those selected would be granted PC and retained, the balance would be released but with pensionary benefits as per the Court's directions. Since these aspects had financial implications, it had to have the approval of the Finance Ministry too, before a GSL could be issued. Though we tried to speed things up as much as possible, ministerial approvals take their own sweet time. These delays were viewed adversely by the Court which felt we, i.e., the Army, were stalling for time. That was far from being the case. As Chief, I wanted to close this chapter as fast as possible.

Within the Army too, a number of issues cropped up, including the modalities for the grant of PC, which was equally complex. Should the entire cohort of affected women officers be treated as one batch or should the Selection Board be carried out year-wise and of that service, as per the comparative merit

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of that year and of their male counterparts? What should be the last ACR for finalizing the merit list? If we had done things on time, the last CR would have been the one just before the SB as per the extant policy. If that were to be followed, then what was the value of CRs earned after that cut-off year till the date of holding the SB? Were the dedicated women officers who had continued to work with their status uncertain and with nothing to gain not be compensated? Once again, I was of the opinion that we should just give PC to the 650-odd affected women officers and be done with it. However, others felt that we would then be doing an injustice to the corresponding male officers of those batches who had been screened out and neither granted PC nor had the Court ordered the largesse of grant of pensionary benefits. Hence, they felt that a screening was required, which was carried out and several women officers were not granted PC. These women officers promptly went to Court, which directed that instead of a batch-wise cut-off, anyone above a certain benchmark, even though lower than the cut-off, should be absorbed. This too was done, with the result that almost all of the affected women officers got PC. In hindsight, I should have stuck to my gut feeling.

With the grant of PC, these officers would now be eligible for promotion to the selection grade rank of Colonel. However, to be eligible for screening, all officers had to have undergone a certain mandatory course at prescribed service levels. While the women officers had undergone the Young Officers' Course of their respective services—Engineers, Signals, ASC, etc., as the case may be—they had not been detailed for the Junior Command (JC) and Senior Command (SC) Courses due to our myopic attitude. Nor had they been allowed to appear for the Defence Services Staff College (DSSC) Exam, which is an important career course. Permission for women officers

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to appear for the DSSC was granted in mid-2021, with fifteen women officers appearing for the entrance exam held in September 2022, out of which six women officers qualified to join DSSC-77, which commenced in April 2023.[10] These anomalies had to be removed to make a level playing field. Once again, there were murmurs among the women officers that this was being done to 'sort them out' and somehow make them ineligible for promotion. A lot of effort had to go in, through the intervention of the Army Commanders, who called and spoke to many women officers in their respective commands, to explain to them that these courses were meant to empower them to hold senior positions in their respective services so that they would not be disadvantaged at a later stage. Hypothetically, while commanding their respective Regiments, suppose an SC-qualified male officer were to get a better CR than a non-SC-qualified woman officer, would that once again amount to discrimination? Slowly but surely, the feeling of dissatisfaction that had permeated the ranks of the women officers dissipated as the women officers once again started having Belief in their senior leadership. The most expressive example of that was the interview given by Lt Col Anila Khatri on the occasion of Women's Day 2022, in which she said, '. . . what gender bias . . . actually there is reverse gender bias . . . [against male officers] . . .'[11] It really made my heart swell with pride when I saw that interview and I felt so fortunate that I have such committed officers serving the Indian Army.

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Covid Pandemic

My entire tenure as Chief was under the shadow of the Covid pandemic. The first reported case in India was from Kerala on 27 January 2020, detected in a female medical student who had

returned from Wuhan.[12] In anticipation of the pandemic that was imminent, we had already launched Operation Namaste as a force protection measure. We had to deal with this challenge on two fronts, one within the Service and the other to help our citizens in times of need. As with every other operation, the MO Dte was nominated as the lead Dte, who would coordinate the effort pan-India.

We are approximately an eleven-lakh-strong Army. Out of this, 20–25 per cent are on leave at any given point in time, mostly in villages in rural areas. Another 10 per cent or so are undergoing courses of instruction to upgrade their skills at various Institutes located within military garrisons primarily in urban areas. Thus, about three to four lakh personnel are always out of their parent units. When the pandemic reared its head and lockdown was enforced, the safety of these personnel became our primary concern. Dealing with the personnel at training institutions was relatively easy. All Institutes were told to simply retain the personnel there, even after the scheduled date of termination of the course(s). Taking care of personnel on leave was more complex. Orders were passed for them to report to the nearest military unit on expiry of leave so that they could be physically taken on strength. This was necessary as otherwise it would amount to overstaying of leave (OSL), which is not only an offence but would also lead to cessation of pay. Even this was not possible in many cases, especially after all train and bus services were suspended. Accordingly, a very rarely used provision was activated, of 'extraordinary leave' to cater for this contingency. But more important was the fact that now the men who were in the units and due to go on leave in the next rotation were also stuck. They could not attend to their domestic matters, births or deaths in the family, with many even having to cancel their own weddings.

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It goes to the credit of our men that they bore this imposition stoically, even cheerfully.

As the days became weeks, we realized that we had to do something to get the men back to their units, many of which were in hard field areas. We hit upon the idea of running special trains and convoys in a 'green bubble'. A convoy would start from a military garrison, a 'green' (safe) zone and then proceed non-stop to the next military garrison, another 'green' zone. Similarly, military special trains were requisitioned, which would be self-contained for food and water for the duration of the journey, halting only at bigger military cantonments. In this manner, we were able to start getting our boys back, while always adhering to the rules. At the destination end, all returning personnel were put into quarantine and only allowed to rejoin their units and the general military population thereafter. In addition, personnel proceeding to border outposts were made to go through two, or sometimes even three rounds of quarantine before reaching their forward posts, where the presence of even one infected person could have catastrophic consequences. This was all happening at the height of the Galwan crisis when units were deployed at the most inhospitable locations far from any medical aid. It goes to the credit of all the Commanders in the chain that they ensured that operational readiness was never compromised. There was not a single instance when any Section or Platoon was 'unfit' due to Covid casualties. We did have our fair share of Covid infections and even Covid-related deaths, the figures for which were put up to me Command-wise every morning as a Covid Sitrep. The figures were very revealing. While our overall cases were more than the national average, probably due to our enhanced testing, the number of deaths was much lower, most likely due to our early detection and better fitness levels. The Covid count in terms of percentage of the

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population was also correlated and therefore any aspersions that the Government was fudging figures were totally misplaced and incorrect. By the middle of March 2021, when the first wave was waning and inoculations were about to commence, the daily infection rate for the whole Army had come down to single digits. In one of the morning updates, the DGMO suggested that, in view of the improved situation, we could dispense with the Covid Sitrep. I replied that we would do so when the daily figure became zero for one week continuously.

I must have been prescient because, within a week of that, the second wave hit the country like a tsunami. At the height of the first wave, our total daily cases had been in the range of fifty to sixty, which suddenly jumped to 350 to 400 cases a day, even within our garrisons. A sixfold increase, which took us by surprise despite the facilities we had created. Medical resources which were just stabilizing from the first wave were swamped and stretched to the limit. These six to eight weeks of April and May 2021 were the worst. We could barely look after our serving and retired personnel and were inundated with calls from friends and relatives imploring us to do something. We tried to help out as much as we could. In the throes of panic, many people were rushing to the metros, when facilities closer at hand were available. In our case, for example, we diverted many cases to the satellite military stations—Meerut, Agra, Ambala, Dehradun, etc., till these too got full. It was heart-wrenching to see so many tragedies unfold. Through it all, our medical fraternity, doctors, nurses and ancillary staff stood steady as rocks and continued to discharge their duties even while facing tragedies of their own. I made sure that their services were recognized, requesting the RM for additional quotas for distinguished service awards so that we could honour our Covid warriors.

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In the initial days of the pandemic, it fell upon us to create quarantine camps to house all our citizens being repatriated from abroad. This we did, with the first camp coming up at Manesar, and subsequently in Jodhpur and Jaisalmer where it was hoped the summer heat would kill the virus. These locations had not only to be made functional with beds, mattresses, toiletries and so on, which was comparatively easy but also manned, which was more difficult. The residents were apprehensive of their status and future and were often given to becoming unruly. Our staff manning these facilities, basically soldiers with no experience of the kind, rose to the occasion. They handled the residents with compassion and maturity and had to be very patient with them. Once the initial shock had worn off and boredom set in, we even had to keep them entertained. Some even became aggressive and disorderly, and they had to be handled with a firm hand. All these responsibilities were undertaken in the spirit of helping our citizens, for, after all, we are their Army. If we don't help them, who else will?

Our medical staff also had the onerous task of setting up and manning Covid facilities. While the infrastructure could easily be built, making it ready to accept patients and treating them is another matter altogether. The DRDO facility that was created near the IGI airport is one example. While the prefab shelters and basic facilities came up quickly enough, there was an acute shortage of doctors and nursing staff to man this facility, committed as the Army is, with manning our own service hospitals. Somehow or the other we pulled out doctors and nurses from wherever possible, training institutions and other staff assignments, and pushed them into the field. Reservists were called up and the service of those due to proceed on discharge or retirement was halted and given extension of service. Rules and regulations only vaguely heard

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of were resurrected and put into effect. Infrastructure works were undertaken on a war footing to build up oxygen plants and generators, which were critical in the fight against Covid.

In this manner, working closely with all other ministries and state governments, we were surely and steadily able to claw our way out of the panic that had set in with the devastating second wave. Simultaneously, the inoculation of all personnel was begun, which afforded a degree of protection. It had to be emphasized though, that the inoculation does not make a person immune to Covid but only diminishes the severity of the attack and therefore, precautionary measures were still absolutely essential. Though our (country's) absolute figures of deaths seemed high, it was not so when seen in percentage terms. The US, for example, with half our population, had twice the number of deaths. India as a country, through a 'Whole of Nation' effort, had beaten back the pandemic, faring much better than so-called developed nations. Something we can truly be proud of.

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Revolution in Bureaucratic Affairs

The term 'Revolution in Military Affairs' (RMA) has been around since the early 2000s. It envisaged a rapid transformation in the entire spectrum in which militaries the world over operate, from doctrine to strategy to tactics, under the influence of technological change. It also aimed at harnessing the power of technology to increase operational effectiveness, bring about efficiency, and minimize casualties and collateral damage. This is what I meant when I had said many times over that we too needed to move from a 'manpower-intensive, to a technologically empowered Service.'[13] However, this transformation would not be possible in a system mired in red

tape and therefore a Revolution in Bureaucratic Affairs (RBA) was equally essential.[14]

The RBA is not pointing fingers at any organization or institution but instead refers to the primacy being given to the 'process' rather than the 'outcome'. This process-driven structure has no place in the modern world. We cannot hope to fight the wars of the future with legacy procedures of the past. This is one aspect that I highlighted in my lectures at various Institutions, including the National Defence College and the Institute of Public Administration. I used to highlight this aspect by giving the example of two flights, the first of United Airlines Flight 173 from Denver to Portland in 1978, and the second of US Airways Flight 1549, also known as the 'Miracle on the Hudson' of 2009. In the first instance, the aircraft experienced a landing gear malfunction while coming in to land. The Captain spent the next hour or so going through every conceivable contingency 'by the book' but ran out of fuel and crashed, killing ten people. The Captain got too involved in the 'process'. Compare that to Flight 1549, which ran into a flock of geese barely two minutes after take-off, losing power to both engines. With no reaction time whatsoever, the Captain only made this simple announcement, 'This is the Captain, brace for landing', and brought the aircraft down on the Hudson River with not a single death. The Captain had focused on the 'outcome'.

The Army is not immune to this bureaucracy either—the Staff (bureaucracy) side being as bogged down in processes, formats and precedents as in any other organization. But there is a difference in that within the Army, there are Command (Line) assignments and Staff assignments, and officers, especially at the senior level, interchange between the two. One could be on the border (Line) commanding a Battalion in the rank of Colonel for one tenure, and then be a Colonel in Staff in the

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Army HQ the next. In Command assignments, the Leader is, more often than not, operating under conditions of uncertainty, wherein risk-taking is the norm. There can be spectacular successes but equally devastating failures. If the decision proves to be right; the Leader is feted, else it's the backroom for the rest of your career. The outcome is everything. That is not so on the Staff side where decisions are taken deliberately, minimizing or doing away with the risk element altogether. The Staff Officer (bureaucrat) remains faceless and nameless and is not really concerned with the outcome of the decision. For the Staff, following procedure is the key to success. In the Army, because of the rotation between the two roles, the Leader and the Staff appreciate each other's perspective and try to address each other's concerns to achieve results. This regular rotation between Line and Staff duties is what keeps everyone grounded. That is not the case on the civil side, where once a bureaucrat always a bureaucrat. There is little or no field experience, except at the very early stages of service. Since success is in the process, rules and regulations are added to make the process as foolproof as possible.

Take the case of the Defence Acquisition Procedure (DAP) 2020, released in September 2020. It is spread over twelve chapters and runs into 657 pages, which is five chapters and 168 pages more than the Defence Procurement Procedure (DPP) 2016.[15] While the stated aim is to simplify the acquisition procedure, it is a moot point whether the addition of 168 pages to an already voluminous DPP of 489 pages, is really being more efficient or contributing to the ease of doing business. Innumerable sentences run into hundreds of words, and paragraphs into countless sentences, severely challenging comprehension, as one tends to forget the beginning of the text by the time the end is reached. Interlacing it with equally

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confusing acronyms further taxes the decipherer.[16] A passage from the DAP reads:

> 'The HQ IDS would now be required to prepare 10-year ICDPs (Integrated Capacity Development Plans) and translate them into appropriate problem definition statements and R&D establishment and industry would be given time and resources to enable transition from technology development for testing, trials and production to take place.'

No wonder that Gen VK Singh, the former COAS (2010–12) had called the acquisition process a deadly game of snakes and ladders, when just as the end seems near, the case slides back right to the bottom.[17] Due to the convoluted process, 'new' equipment that is being inducted is already outdated because of the technological advances that have occurred in the interim. An RBA is therefore the only way the process will improve. Perhaps a system of Line and Staff needs to be introduced to give the bureaucrats dealing with these cases a feel of the ground and instil in them a sense of urgency. When Shri George Fernandes was the RM, he sent two senior bureaucrats to the Siachen Glacier when he came to know that they had held back a file on the purchase of snow scooters for soldiers deployed at the world's highest battlefield.[18] The jawan at the front line couldn't care less where the weapons system comes from, the company that bagged the order or the costs. He just wants the weapon system 'as of yesterday'. What is important, is equipping our men with the best at the fastest possible speed. That should be our bounden duty. Regrettably, the Indian bureaucracy, with the exception of a significant few, is still hung up on a work-to-rule basis with a focus on procedure, not productivity.[19] This approach has even irked the PM and on

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one occasion, he remarked that 'there is so much that I want to do, *lekin yeh babu karne nahin dete*' (but these bureaucrats don't allow me to).

Emergency Powers

During the Doklam Crisis of 2017, Emergency Powers had been delegated to the Service HQ, wherein capital and revenue purchases of up to Rs 300 crore could be made without reference to the ministry or the IFA. Gen Rawat, who had been the COAS during the Doklam crisis, had seen the advantage accrued. Now, as the CDS he wasted no time in getting Emergency Powers delegated once again, when the crisis in Eastern Ladakh erupted in June 2020. However, these Emergency Powers (EP-1) were given grudgingly starting from August 2020 for six months only, i.e., up to December 2020, effectively giving a window of only five months and with caveats. First, all contracts had to be concluded during the duration of the delegated powers, and second, the delivery of the contracted items was to be completed within one year of signing the contract. This was the bureaucracy hitting back. These twin conditions virtually ruled out the acquisition of many critical items, as the procurement process had still to be followed in toto, while the world was reeling under the disruptions caused by the Covid pandemic. EP-2 and EP-3 were also given in the same six-monthly tranches, up to December 2020, and with the same restrictions. If only the initial EP had been given unreservedly for a duration of one year, the operational benefit would have been immense.

Nevertheless, all the Directorates and Branches in the Army HQ took it upon themselves to make the most of these delegated powers and worked through the Covid restrictions.

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One of the major success stories was the signing of the contract with IdeaForge for the 'Switch' unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) in January 2021 for a cost of Rs 140 crore, barely six months after the powers had been delegated, after following all norms and financial formalities. In fact, this was one aspect that we, the VCOAS and I, were very particular about, namely that there should not be any deviation from the established procedure that might lead to finger-pointing later on, about misuse of these delegated powers. The first of these UAVs started getting delivered well within the contracted period and are in service in Eastern Ladakh. Another positive fallout was that IdeaForge, a start-up, had won this contract while competing against well-established players such as the Tata Group, Dynamatic Technologies Ltd, and even Israel's Elbit Systems. This gave a big boost to the Atmanirbhar Bharat and Make in India campaigns, besides giving confidence to the MSMEs. During this phase of the delegation of Emergency Powers (EP-1 to EP-3), we were able to place orders/sign as many as sixty-eight different contracts for over Rs 6600 crore, of which almost 70 per cent were with Indian firms.

More than anything else, this showed that the entire acquisition process can be shortened and made more efficient if the focus is on outcomes—the product, rather than the process. The delegation of the powers to the Service HQ, the users, automatically resulted in the change in focus. Greater delegation is needed, particularly if the orders are going to Indian firms and entities, as it is our own local economy that will get a boost. This should be the norm rather than an 'Emergency' delegation. Control can be exercised through the budget allocation, but once allocated, there should be no need for any more intra-ministerial oversight, as the CAG[20] would in any case carry out the oversight function in due course.

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A Uniform is Uniform

The Army was the first to introduce the camouflage pattern of uniform, more simply known as Combat Dress, in the 1980s, replacing the olive-green uniform with a disruptive pattern battle dress that provided an inbuilt element of camouflage. Prior to that, the field dress was the same olive-green uniform after removing all accoutrements and replacing brass badges of rank with cloth epaulettes. Over the years, the other Services, Para-Military Forces and CAPF followed suit. The result was that there was a plethora of similar-looking camouflage pattern combat dresses floating around, making it difficult to identify who is who. Moreover, although the Ordnance Factory Board (OFB) was mandated to produce these uniforms from cloth sourced through the industry, other private players could also do the same. This pattern became so popular that it was used for everything from car seat covers to *shamianas* (marquees). The sanctity of the combat dress had been lost and we had experienced its deleterious effect when called in for Aid to Civil Authority, to contain the Jat agitation of 2016, with some people even saying that they had seen Army personnel 'running away'.

With that in mind, it was decided to evolve a unique pattern to that in use since 2008, that would not only be more modern but unique to the Indian Army. The responsibility for this devolved on the AG and MGO, and the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) was roped in for this purpose. Several factors went into the new design. The NIFT created separate teams to look into aspects related to the design of the pattern, modern light-weight fabric and prototyping. The NIFT team was very patient with us, and I must go on record to appreciate their efforts. Ultimately, more than seventeen

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different options emerged as various combinations of design and fabric types. Of these, four were shortlisted and adequate sample pieces were made into uniforms, which were then sent for trials to units all over India, in field areas and peace stations, from the deserts of Rajasthan to the jungles of the North East. Ultimately, one design was approved. I myself tested the new uniform during my visit to Eastern Command and that was the first time it was seen in public. It was formally introduced into the Army on Army Day 2022, with the SF contingent at the Army Day Parade wearing it for the first time. Most importantly, we also applied for the Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) of the design so as to be able to check its unauthorized manufacture and sale.[21]

One of the aspects that had been agitating Young Officers for a long time was what is called the 'lanyard' culture', the lanyard being a cord worn around the shoulder or neck with one end tucked into the breast pocket, which is taken out when required, to secure a whistle, knife or pistol. The lanyard now only had a ceremonial function, the requirement of securing such items having disappeared long ago, much like a vestigial organ. It can still be seen though, being used by the police to secure the pistol on their hip. Like everything else, it had its utility at some point in time, but for the Army, it had lost its functional value. Every Infantry Regiment and Corps (Armoured, Artillery, Signal, Medical, etc.) has its own set of accoutrements of different colours and patterns, though all are worn on the basic olive-green uniform. Of all the accoutrements, the lanyard is the most distinctive.

Each Regiment and Corps gets associated with a particular colour, which permeates into the consciousness of every soldier of that Regiment and is one of the factors that goes towards inculcating esprit de corps. For the Sikh Light Infantry, it is

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the Palash or 'flame of the forest' (orange), a very distinctive colour that can be seen, and its wearer identified, from far away. Walking into a room full of people, a quick glance is enough to register how many people in your Regiment are present. It is expected that if anybody approaches you wearing the same colour 'lanyard', his request has to be accommodated. Regimentation has its uses in building up the cohesion and sense of belonging, so necessary in wartime. If a soldier stands and fights to the last man and last round, as did the men of Charlie Company, 13 KUMAON under Major Shaitan Singh at Rezang La in the 1962 War, it was for the izzat of the Regiment. As long as the Regimental spirit is harnessed to become a battle-winning factor, it has its uses. However, at some stage, a senior officer has to rise above this parochialism, which is why in my first address to my Officers on becoming Chief, I had categorically mentioned that I was the Chief of the entire Army and not merely of the Sikh Light Infantry, though my Regiment will forever be embedded in my heart and soul. It was time to walk the talk.

Till about the mid-1980s, officers on promotion to the rank of Brigadier used to write IA, Indian Army, after their name and not their Regiment. Thus, Colonel Keen Kumar (KUMAON) would now be Brigadier Keen Kumar (IA). The cap badge on the beret or peak cap would also become the Ashoka Symbol and not the Regimental crest, which practice continues even now. There was some logic in this and I felt that we needed to return to this system, where Brigadiers and above 'belong' to the Army and not to their Regiments. How does one initiate this process of change of a deeply ingrained tradition? The larger the organization and the stronger the tradition, the more difficult it is to bring about a change. We decided to start with our Mess Dress, which is a half-sleeved

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white shirt with badges of rank, black trousers and Regimental pattern cummerbund. A very small change was made in that Brigadiers and above would now all wear a simple black silk cummerbund with the Indian Army crest. That's all. A very small and seemingly insignificant change, but it broke the taboo surrounding regimentation and showed to the rank and file that the senior leadership are sensitive to the feedback received from the environment. This change was made after seeking the opinion of all Army Commanders (including then Lt Gen Manoj Pande), who were unanimously of the view that not only was this required but must also extend in due course of time to the rest of the uniforms as well. This process was carried forward by Gen Manoj Pande, the current Chief. With effect from 1 August 2023, all officers of the rank of Brigadier and above now wear a standard pattern of accoutrements, shorn of any Regimental insignia, as part of the normal working dress.[22] Continuity and Change go hand in hand.

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4.5

Consolidation

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Military Diplomacy

Although most of my tenure was under the shadow of the Covid pandemic, we did manage to visit a number of foreign countries under the rubric of defence cooperation. Military cooperation spans a range of activities starting from student exchange programmes to conferences in the form of Subject Matter Expert Exchanges (SMEE) to joint training at the Platoon, Company and Battalion level, and of course, reciprocal visits by senior officers. The visits by the Chief had both a functional and symbolic value through the message it conveyed. My visits to Nepal and Myanmar highlighted the importance of India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy. Each and every foreign visit garnered considerable interest even before the visit actually commenced and helped project the image of our country under the Diplomacy Information Military Economy (DIME) construct. There were always some defining or unique aspects to each of the visits, the nuances of which were noticed by the media. Veena accompanied me on each of

Four Stars of Destiny.indd 374 11/28/2023 12:45:23 PM

these visits, except to Bhutan and Myanmar, and the presence of a lady in the delegation made a world of a difference, making social interactions that much more informal. Through the interactions between the ladies, it also enabled us to get a feel of how families of service personnel are looked after in their respective countries, something which would not have been possible in an all-male delegation.

The first visit in 2020 itself was to Nepal where I was to be conferred with the honorary rank of General of the Nepali Army. This is a unique and reciprocal tradition between the Nepali Army and the Indian Army, possibly the only such arrangement in the world. During the visit, I was conferred this title at their Rashtrapati Bhawan, Shital Niwas, by the President of Nepal, the Honourable Bidya Devi Bhandari, who served as the second president of Nepal from 2015 to 2023 and was the first woman to hold this office in the country. Nepal–India ties had hit a new low earlier in the year over Kalapani, over which both India and Nepal lay claim.[1] The dispute came to the fore when in November 2019, India published a revised political map showing the newly created Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. The map showed Kalapani as part of the Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand. Nepal protested immediately and drew attention to the lingering issue. On 8 May, India inaugurated the Darchula–Lipulekh Pass link road, cutting across the disputed Kalapani area that is used by Indian pilgrims to Kailash Manasarovar. Nepal hit back by summoning the Indian Ambassador to Nepal, Shri Vinay Mohan Kwatra, to convey a formal protest.[2] Against this backdrop, my visit and the conferment of the rank of Honorary General signalled a thaw in the relations and paved the way for a resumption of diplomatic initiatives. We also gifted to the Nepali Army three ambulances and equipment for two field

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hospitals apart from Covid vaccines in large numbers. I also had the opportunity to meet KP Sharma Oli, the then Prime Minister and Defence Minister of Nepal.

During the visit, I had, of course, met Gen Puran Chandra Thapa, the Nepali Army Chief. On one of the evenings, he hosted a reception for us, to which he had invited all the former Nepali Chiefs. While speaking with them, they all fondly remembered their visits to India and their Indian contemporaries. That gave birth to the idea that we should all get together—past and present Chiefs. In Sep 2022, I held the Chiefs' Conclave, a biannual event in which all the former Chiefs get together. In this conclave, non-classified issues and initiatives underway are discussed and the views of the former Chiefs are sought in light of the experiences they would have had while in service as well as post-retirement. Following up on the idea that I had, I invited all the former Nepali Chiefs on the last day of the Conclave. It was heartening to see how all of us immediately bonded, the years in between just melting away. This once again showed the strong Army-to-Army connect between the two countries. I also hosted Gen Thapa's successor, Gen Prabhu Ram Sharma, when he came to India, for his conferment of the rank of Honorary General of the Indian Army, and he recollected this get-together of the Chiefs. When the Nepali Army celebrated their Army Day in February 2023, Gen Sharma followed up by inviting all the former Indian Army Chiefs to join the celebrations. To honour the memory of Gen Bipin Rawat, they even installed a 'Bipin Bell' at the famous Muktinath Temple. Military diplomacy has a great role to play in cementing the relationship between countries and needs to be leveraged further.

The visits to the UAE and Saudi Arabia were the first-ever visits by an Indian Army Chief to either of these countries.

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Both the DAs, Gp Capt Sucharu Rai and Col GS Grewal, SC, respectively, were professionals of the highest order. In fact, Col GS Grewal did a fantastic job in the evacuation of Indian nationals from Sudan in April 2023 as part of Op Kaveri, with his statement, 'Trust me, all of you will reach home safely' going viral.[3] The strategic signalling was not lost on Pakistan. During this visit, particularly to Saudi Arabia, Veena's presence opened doors that would otherwise have been shut. She was the only one who could interact with the ladies of the host country and the insights she gained helped us understand these countries much better. Most of the ladies she met told her how they were not in favour of polygamy and how demeaning it is to their self-respect. She was also able to visit the Princess Nourah Bint Abdulrahman University (PNU), a public women's university located in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, which is the largest women's university in the world. The setting up of the PNU was a step towards modernity and showed the world the importance given towards female education. It gave us an idea of how Saudi Arabia is not as fundamentalist as it is made out to be. Such insights would have been lost had Veena not accompanied me.

During the visit to Israel, we went to the Har Addis View Point overlooking Lebanon and were also shown one of the tunnels, five to six feet wide and more than 80 feet underground, with its own lighting and ventilation system, used by the Lebanese Hezbollah to infiltrate Israel. In each of the visits, we tried to go beyond the purely official and do something different. We were told in our childhood that several Jews from Pune and its surrounding areas, Bene Israelis as they were known, had emigrated to Israel in the 1960s and 1970s. We asked the DA, Gp Capt K Sundarmani, if he could locate some of them, which he did. During the visit, we had high

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tea with almost half a dozen couples, now all Israeli citizens. The visit was just after Diwali, so Veena (whose idea it was) had carried some traditional Marathi Diwali sweets. These couples were very happy to speak in Marathi and hear about Pune and were touched by our gesture. Mr Yaron Mayer, who I had befriended during my DA tenure in Myanmar, was also similarly located and we went to visit him and his wife at their kibbutz near Tel Aviv, thereby getting a feel of a kibbutz too.

As a young subaltern, my uncle, Maj Gen AS Naravane, had fought in the North African Campaign and had been taken Prisoner of War (PW), when their gun position had been overrun by the Germans. They had been housed at the POW camp at Averse in Italy. He had written in his memoirs (*A Soldier's Life in War and Peace*) how they had escaped from that camp and been sheltered by a local Italian family. Once again with the help of the DA, Col Rohit Teotia, we were able to track down Ms Mena Fatato, the granddaughter of that gentleman. When we went to Cassino to inaugurate the Indian Army War Memorial, we met the lady and I presented her with a copy of my uncle's book. The lady and her husband were moved to tears, that over seventy years later we had reached out to them. More than my meeting with the Italian Chief, Lt Gen Pietro Serino, or the Defence Minister Lorenzo Guerini in Rome, it is this meeting that made the headlines in the local press. Unfortunately, towards the end of the visit, Veena tested Covid-positive during the pre-departure testing and had to remain behind in Rome while the rest of the delegation returned as scheduled. It was a difficult but unavoidable decision. It would be more than two weeks before Veena could travel again, so she had a 'Roman Holiday' of sorts.

During the visit to the United Kingdom, I inspected the Guard of Honour provided by the Grenadier Guards on Horse

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Guards' Parade Square as part of the welcome by the British Army. My mother-in-law who was watching the proceedings on TV told us on our return as to how moved she had been to see the people who once ruled us now giving me a ceremonial welcome. During my meeting with the Chief of General Staff, Gen Sir Mark Carleton-Smith, and the Chief of Defence Staff, Gen Sir Nicholas Carter, I presented each of them a book titled *Stealth War* by Robert Spalding, which describes 'How China Took Over While America's Elite Slept'. We got a taste of how true and far-reaching is the Chinese influence and monitoring of social media when the *Global Times* promptly questioned the motives behind my presenting this book. While they denounced the book as propaganda, the very fact that they were monitoring my every move, down to what book I had presented to whom, just proved how true the book was. I also gave a talk at the Royal United Service Institute (RUSI) on India's National Security Perspective.

The visit to South Korea was equally interesting and once again, the first visit to that country by an Army Chief. These visits not only broke new ground but also visibly demonstrated our commitment to the 'Act East' policy. In Korea, we visited the Dora Observation Post on the Military Demarcation Line that separates North and South Korea, the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Over dinner one evening, I mentioned to the Korean Army Chief, Gen Nam Yeong-shin, that I had watched the Korean serial *Crash Landing on You*, which is set between North and South Korea, and Gen Nam was very pleased to hear about it. But he added that his soldiers were not too happy with the serial, because the hero was a North Korean officer who had been shown in a good light, who the South Korean girl falls in love with. Soldiers will be soldiers the world over. He also told me that the hero and heroine of the serial had got married in real life too.

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During the visit to Sri Lanka, I met with the Sri Lankan Army Chief, Gen Shavendra Silva, who is currently their CDS. I also had the occasion to call on the President, Prime Minister and Defence Minister. It was evident from this that they attached a lot of importance to their relations with India and were very grateful for all the 'no strings attached' assistance we were extending, unlike China, which had drawn them into a debt trap. During the visit, a Driving Simulator and an Infantry Weapons Training Simulator were presented to the Sri Lankan Army, both of which had been developed in-house by our Simulator Development Division. Gen Silva and I even went to witness the joint Sri Lanka–India exercise, 'Mitra Shakti', at the Combat Training School, Ampara. I was also taken to Trincomalee for old times' sake, where I saw that my 4th Mile Post was now, of all things, a Tata showroom. I also laid a wreath at the IPKF Memorial constructed in 2008 by Sri Lanka at Sri Jayewardenepura Kotte on the outskirts of Colombo. The names of the 1200 soldiers who died are inscribed on black marble under the words, 'Valiant Were Their Deeds, Undying Be Their Memories'.

My visit to Bangladesh coincided with the Swarnim Vijay Varsh, the Golden Jubilee of the Bangladesh War of Liberation of 1971. It was also the birth centenary year of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who had played a pivotal role in their independence movement, going on to become their first Prime Minister, before being tragically assassinated in 1975, and the nationalistic fervour was visible everywhere. Along with Gen Aziz Ahmed, we also went to Mirpur to see the finale of 'Ex Shantir Ogrosena', a multinational exercise set up for carrying out a peacekeeping role under the UN, in which troops from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and India participated, besides observers from other South East Asian Countries. In her

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address to the participants, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, acknowledged the sacrifices made by the Indian Army in their freedom struggle and said that Bangladesh would always remain grateful.

Another low-key visit (as with Bhutan) was the one to Myanmar undertaken by me and the FS, Shri Harsh Vardhan Shringla, in late Oct 2020. In fact, ours was the last high-level delegation to Myanmar prior to their General Elections of November 2020, in which Daw Aung Sang Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, won a landslide victory leading ultimately led to the military coup of February 2021. It was the first time I met ASSK, as she had been under house arrest throughout my DA tenure in Myanmar, with even the road leading to her bungalow on the bank of the Inya Lake blocked for normal traffic. It was an honour to meet such an iconic figure but it was apparent even then that there was no love lost between her and the military. In fact, at one point during our discussions she even said, 'I wish our Army was as professional as yours,' in an obvious reference to the apolitical nature of the Indian Army.

There was another interesting incident during the visit. Just before the formal interaction, the FS came to me saying that in the seating plan, the Myanmar side had put him (FS) at the head and myself in the second seat. The FS had pointed out to his counterpart that I was the head of the Delegation but was told that this was the plan approved by ASSK. We were in a quandary as to what to do, with the FS volunteering to talk to the Myanmar side once again. I thought that it would be a waste of time especially as the meeting was about to commence. We decided that we would enter the conference room with me leading the way and I would naturally take the first seat as the head of the delegation, which would be face-saving for all.

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During my one-on-one with the military leaders, Sr Gen Min Aung Hlaing and Vice Senior General Soe Win, we discussed various avenues for furthering defence cooperation. Both the Generals were full of appreciation for the conduct of Operation Sunrise under my stewardship as Army Commander, Eastern Command. My having been the DA in Myanmar of course helped immensely. In fact, Vice Senior General Soe Win had been the Commander of the Northern Regional Command at Myitkyina when I was the DA, and it was he who had organized my visit to Kambaiti Pass on the Myanmar–China border and towards Pangsau on the old Stilwell Road.

I have always felt that the power of military diplomacy remains underutilized. It is time we looked at a military-diplomatic corps, by seconding officers to the Foreign Service, where they can be permanently absorbed. This would also be another form of lateral induction, particularly for officers who have been on deputation abroad either as DAs or as part of UN missions. For example, Maj Gen JS Menon, who had been a UN observer in Mozambique, has been heading the UN Disengagement Observer Force since February 2016. The expertise of Army, Navy and Air Force officers is not being made full use of. The proposed expansion of the IFS would benefit us greatly, through the induction of former Defence Attachés.

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Oting Incident

In December 2021, thirteen locals lost their lives in Oting, causing a significant blow to the peace process in Nagaland. This tragic incident occurred in the backdrop of a stabilized security situation, achieved due to persistent efforts of many

years by the Security Forces (SF). Until the Oting incident, the SF had not provided any trigger for the local Naga sentiments to turn antagonistic towards the SF.

Earlier, in end-November, joint operations between the Army and AR had been carried out in the same area, based on credible intelligence corroborated at the Multi-Agency Centre (MAC) level, a forum for intelligence sharing, of terrorists of a proscribed group. However, nothing came out of it, and the operations were called off late on 2 December 2021. The very next day, based on specific inputs from sources of 21 PARA (SF), the operations were launched again into the same general area, but this time they went by themselves. As reported by 21 PARA (SF), contact with suspected insurgents was made between 1600 and 1700 hours on 4 December 2021, who were moving in a pick-up type of truck from Tiru to Oting, by which time it was already dusk. Initial reports revealed six fatal and two non-fatal civilian casualties. After hearing the firing, a mob congregated and attacked the 21 PARA (SF) team, who in self-defence were forced to fire back on the violent mob and managed to extricate themselves to safety. The scuffle resulted in seven more civilian casualties and severe injury to three soldiers of the 21 PARA (SF) team, out of which one soldier later succumbed to his injuries. The next day, on 5 December, the local public gathered in Mon Town for the funeral of the deceased civilians. However, information that the funeral had been rescheduled for the next day was, or could not be communicated to all, which infuriated the gathering that soon turned into a mob. The local mob thus initially vandalized the premises of the office of the Konyak Union (KU), from where the funeral procession was to start. Thereafter, the crowd started moving towards the main gate of the Bn Tac HQ, Mon, of 27 AR. They initially set the main gate on fire and

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vandalized the adjacent guard room. The large mob thereafter entered the Tac HQ and set other barracks on fire, including the CO's residence. It was only when the mob attempted to enter the *Kote* (armoury) that the AR were forced to open fire in order to prevent the looting of weapons. This resulted in one more civilian casualty. The restraint shown by the AR, in the face of this intense provocation and fear for their own safety, was most praiseworthy.

The shadow of the Oting incident affected the overall security situation in the state, and multiple underground groups and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) tried to exploit the incident for their own ends. Immediately after the incident, the Eastern Nagaland People's Organization (ENPO) and Konyak Union (KU) issued a call for their non-cooperation with the SF. There was widespread anger among the public, who saw it as a case of excessive force by the security forces. This anger led to protests and demonstrations, and in some cases, violence against the security forces. Public clamour for repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) increased, and certain areas of Nagaland were removed from the purview of the Disturbed Area Act, to assuage public sentiment.

The entire incident thus had three phases: the initial ambush by the Army; the retaliation by the locals; and the storming of the AR camp the next day. The SF Team immediately realized their mistake and took immediate steps to evacuate the two injured civilians to the hospital, who both survived due to this prompt action. When the locals arrived at the scene, the SF Team had lowered their weapons and were trying to explain the events to the agitated villagers when they were attacked and set upon. The rampage by the mob the next day at Mon had absolutely no justification as the AR had not even been involved in the incident at Oting. The locals were thus the initiators of

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two of the three incidents. It was a clear case of some unsavoury anti-national elements trying to further their own agenda.

I came to know of the initial incident on the 4th evening itself, when the Army Commander Lt Gen Manoj Pande rang me up.[4] We were still digesting this information when the news of the second incident came in. I rang up the RM, NSA and the CDS as I realized that this incident was going to hit the headlines. The NSA was, of course, perturbed, as this incident was sure to affect the discussions on the Naga Peace Accord that were ongoing, but nevertheless said that it was a good thing that I had told him so that he could straightaway do some damage control. The next day, 3 Corps and Eastern Command issued a formal statement that the ambush was a result of mistaken identity and expressed regret over the incident. It was while we were actually trying to defuse the situation that the attack on the AR camp at Mon took place.

Over the next couple of days, there was intense pressure on us to declare some punitive disciplinary action. But against whom? The team had launched the operation based on credible intelligence and had been shadowing this group of terrorists for some time. Oting is in the vicinity of illegal coal mines and therefore the hub of extortion activities. Hence, it was reasonable to expect terrorist movements in the area. Errors of omission and commission would only emerge through a proper inquiry, and only then could action be taken against anyone. This knee-jerk reaction had to be avoided. Accordingly, Eastern Command immediately ordered a high-level Court of Inquiry to be headed by the GOC, 2 Mtn Div. Despite several hints to at least 'suspend' someone, anyone, we decided to await the outcome of the inquiry, which was completed in record time. I remembered my time as CO, 2 RR and the operations we had conducted, not all of which were successful. My superiors had

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shown their faith in me. It was now time for me to show the same faith in my men. Concurrently, the State Government too constituted an SIT, in which the Army and the SF deposed voluntarily. However, the SIT had no member from the SF as part of the SIT. Expectedly, the report blamed the Army and AR for everything, when clearly the civilians were at fault for the second and third incidents. While accusing the SF of HR violations, the report was strangely silent on the culpability and action to be taken against those who had attacked the SF Team and the AR camp. One of our jawans had also died and many more were injured. What about our human rights? Is our life not precious? The law of the land should apply to all.

The non-cooperation by the locals continued and despite our extending the olive branch, we were making no headway. Oting, the site of the incident, falls under the tribal jurisdiction of the ENPO, as the governing body of six Naga tribes. Due to my earlier association with Nagaland, I requested some of the office-bearers of the ENPO for a meeting, which took place on 22 March 2022, in the Delhi Area Officers' Mess, far from any prying eyes. R Tsapikiu Sangtam, President of the ENPO, Manglang Phom, Gen Secretary and C Bendangmeren Chang, Finance Secretary, attended the meeting, for which I went alone. Over a few drinks, we had a fair and frank, no-holds-barred discussion. While they poured their hearts out, I also made it clear that this impasse wasn't helping anyone. In fact, it was the villagers who were suffering more. The need of the hour I told them was not to enter into a blame game but to start the process of reconciliation and apply salve on these wounds, rather than trying to keep them festering. My meeting them had a salutary effect and they agreed to call off the boycott of the SF. I conveyed this to the IGAR (N), Maj Gen Vikas Lakhera, asking him to meet these office-bearers

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of the ENPO and take matters forward. This he did and the ENPO officially revoked its non-cooperation movement on 28 April 2022, just a few days before I retired. The Inquiry itself was completed in record time and directions were given on it by Lt Gen Pande in his capacity of Eastern Army Commander for administrative and disciplinary action at various levels in the chain of command. The aim was not to 'punish' anyone but to ensure that such heartbreaking incidents do not recur. It also showed that differences can be resolved through dialogue and a sympathetic approach.

In the months that followed, the AR carried out a number of civic action projects to regain the trust and confidence of the locals. This effort has yielded results, so much so that the local population has even offered their land for establishing a temporary AR camp in Oting itself, quite close to 'ground zero', the site where the unfortunate incident occurred.

Litigation

One often hears or sees news reports of serving or retired personnel going to Court to seek redress of grievances. This is perfectly fine and within their rights. In many instances, the Courts rule in favour of the individual, which is also fine by us. However, the problem arises in the implementation of the Court order, which can only be done after MoD approval. At times, even if the Army has accepted the ruling of the Court, the Ministry may decide to appeal. A case in point is the One Rank One Pension (OROP) scheme. Without going into the merits of specific cases, the fact is that once a decision has been given, it should be implemented, instead of giving specious excuses. All possible rulings, favourable or unfavourable, should have been anticipated and catered for.

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In almost all cases, there is a financial angle involved. When the claim for payment as directed by the Court is sent to the Office of the CGDA, they start raising observations that delay the implementation of the Court order. The Court has given its ruling after going through all the relevant documentation and based on the merits of the case. What then is the point of asking for further clarifications from the Service HQ? Take the recent case (May 2023), involving the Principal Integrated Financial Adviser (PIFA) of the MoD, who unilaterally challenged the Court ruling and refused to release the pensionary benefits due to soldiers. The Court not only summoned the PIFA (M) but also the Army officer dealing with the case, who clearly was not at fault.[5] This often gives rise to the perception that the Army is fighting against its own personnel. Nothing can be further from the truth. In this regard, the Committee of Experts report of 2015 highlighted the following:[6]

(a) **Default reaction is 'To appeal'.** The first reaction to any case decided in favour of any service personnel, especially by the AFTs is to file an appeal.
(b) **Perception that 'Government Policy' is Sacrosanct**. There is a wrong perception among some officers that 'Government Policy' is so sacred that whenever a Court takes a decision against 'policy', it has to be appealed against.
(c) **Litigant is perceived as Acting against the Interests of the State.** There is a tendency to ostracize litigants and they are perceived as acting against the interests of the State.
(d) **Pressure to 'win cases' and incidence of ego-fuelled litigation**. The first and foremost duty of an officer dealing with litigation or even of a counsel in a Court is to assist the Court in arriving at justice rather than to 'win cases' by getting personally involved with briefs.

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(e) **Lack of uniformity of implementation in cases that have attained finality.** Litigation also increases when cases settled judicially and which have attained finality either at the High Court or Supreme Court level are not implemented for similarly placed employees, thereby leading to more litigation on similar issues. The compounded cost of litigation at times surpasses the final financial effect on the Government.

Another case where the Ministry entered into unnecessary litigation pertains to the anomaly in the pay of Brigadiers and Maj Gens. When I got promoted to Maj Gen, Veena had asked me how much more pay would I get. I replied that actually, I would now be getting Rs 12,000 less. That's ridiculous, she had replied, how could a junior get more pay than his senior? Very simple logic, no doubt, but something that the powers-that-be refused to admit. This situation prevails because, in addition to other ranks, all officers up to the rank of Brigadier are entitled to a Military Service Pay (MSP), depending on rank. A Brigadier gets the maximum of Rs 15,500. The MSP was first approved in the Sixth Pay Commission, with the caveat that it would stop once an individual is promoted to the rank of Major General, thus resulting in the anomaly of a Brigadier getting more pay than a Maj Gen. To address this long-pending issue, a 'personal pay' of Rs 14,900 has been proposed to be added to the pay of Maj Gens to bring them at par with Brigadiers. This proposal has been endorsed by the MoD (Finance) but the file has been pending with the Ministry of Finance since January 2022. In the intervening decade or so, hundreds of Maj Gens (myself included) have been denied their rightful dues, with a few having even passed away. A similar situation prevails with respect to the Non-Functional Upgrade (NFU) for the Armed Forces.

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This, and many other such anomalies, were pointed out to the MoD, but most of them have remained unresolved, even more than a decade later. This has forced officers and other ranks too, to approach the courts for redress, thus giving the impression that either the Army does not care or that we are fighting against our own personnel. Many of these issues would get resolved much faster if there were to be cross-staffing in the MOD, with the Secretary, Department of Ex-Servicemen Welfare, being a uniformed person.

Higher Defence Organization (HDO)

The crisis in Ladakh highlighted the need for a more robust HDO to handle various crises. This HDO has to be beyond the MoD but short of the CCS. The CSG is a good model to work upon, which proved its worth during the Ladakh crisis, the only lacunae being that the other two Service Chiefs were not part of the CSG. The CSG can easily be renamed as the Security Studies Group, co-chaired by the RM and EAM, and including all three Chiefs. The CDS then can become a permanent member of the CCS. Moreover, a serving two-star-rank officer having good tri-service experience must be part of the PMO.

The creation of the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) is a step in the right direction, but much more reform is required. The first is to have cross-postings of officials in the two verticals of the MoD. While the DMA has civilian staff at the level of Joint Secretaries and Directors, the Department of Defence (DoD) vertical does not have any uniformed personnel. This anomaly needs to be rectified. Furthermore, the Secretary, DMA, wears the additional hats of CDS as well as permanent Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee. These

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are too many responsibilities for any one person to handle. The entire organogram of the MoD therefore needs to be reworked to achieve true integration within the MoD. Ideally, through cross-staffing, every alternate echelon should be from the uniformed service, at the Director and above level. The three Vice-Chiefs too should have powers akin to the Additional Secretary in the DMA. This will minimize the need to refer each and every case to the Ministry. While to the outside world the MoD is one entity, in actuality, it is more like the Ministry as one entity and the three Service HQs as separate entities. Delays are not in the Service HQ but in the Ministry, a faceless, unfeeling creature. These should be interim measures, however, with ultimately each of the Services becoming full-fledged Departments within the MoD, with the Vice-Chiefs exercising the powers of Secretary, akin to the Department of Defence Production, Department of Ex-Servicemen Welfare, etc., each of which has its own Secretary-level officer heading the department.

However, more important than this organizational change is the attitudinal change that is required, which will allow the organizational changes to fructify. As long as the Armed Forces are kept out of the decision-making loop, there can be no real reform. The CDS/permanent Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee is not even a permanent member of the CCS. In the aftermath of the accidental firing of a BrahMos missile by the Air Force, I, as the officiating Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee and COAS, was neither called nor consulted even once. Yet, had there been any adverse fallout of the incident, it would have been the three Services at the forefront of the action. This suspicion on the loyalty of the Armed Forces and the canard that the Army will stage a 'coup' if given more powers must be laid to rest once and for all. Unless all facets

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of the DIME paradigm are exploited to the fullest, we as a country will never be able to realize our full potential. The Armed Forces are always called in to do the 'firefighting', but perhaps, if we were to be part of the process, there would be no 'fire' in the first place.

Allocation of Assets

The point remains, though, that a ground-to-ground weapon system should never have been with the Air Force to begin with. It makes no sense to have the same system with two different Services performing essentially the same tasks. This had even been recorded in the minutes of a COCS meeting that the BrahMos should only be with the Army, but somewhere along the way, this had got overlooked. For the Army, the BrahMos is a major cutting-edge system, manned by the best. It is a full-time job, and an officer serves in a BrahMos Regiment for years and years till he rises in due course to command that Regiment. For the Air Force, it is a peripheral system; for them, the aircraft takes priority. It is precisely for this reason that Army officers are now being posted to BrahMos units of the Navy and Air Force. The better solution, however, would be to make all these units part of the Army.

There is similarly a need to review the allocation of all assets keeping in mind the changing character of war. Platforms that were specialized in bygone years are commonplace now. In the Army, we used to have special Missile Battalions, armed with anti-tank guided missiles. Now these missiles are with every Battalion and specialized missile units have been done away with. Take helicopters for instance: previously only with the Air Force, they are now with all three Services. Attack Helicopters (AH), which will always be in close support of

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ground troops should be with the Army in totality. Once again, it makes little sense to have them with the Air Force, and then start coordinating roles and tasks and making joint target lists. The first lot of Apache AH went to the Air Force, and the second lot, whose delivery is expected to commence in 2024, is going to the Army. The fact that the second lot is going to the Army is an acknowledgement of the fact that AHs are more intrinsically linked to the ground battle. Why not then transfer all the AH to the Army? Sometimes in trying to please everyone, one ends up pleasing no one. A 'satisficing' solution is not the answer, and all decisions must be made on the altar of operational effectiveness. It is in this context that the role of the CDS assumes significance, to bring out the requisite synergy among the Services.

Thal Sena Bhawan

Apart from the Sena Bhawan in Central Delhi, which houses a majority of the branches that comprise the Army HQ, there are several offices spread out all over Delhi. To get all these offices under one roof, it was decided to have a separate Thal Sena Bhawan (TSB) over and above the existing Sena Bhawan, to be located in Delhi Cantt. This project had been pursued vigorously by Gen Rawat and it was now for me to carry it forward. For the TSB, the site selected was diagonally opposite the Manekshaw Centre, as one approaches Delhi Cantt from the airport to the left of NH 8, just where the road takes a sharp right turn towards Dhaula Kuan. As a first step to get the project going, we decided to have the *bhoomi poojan* and laying of the Foundation Stone done by the RM. This event was conducted on 21 February 2021. The TSB, spread over 39 acres, would be a multistoreyed building, able to accommodate around

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6000 personnel, with a built-up area of around 7.5 lakh square metres, to be constructed in five years. I was keen on getting the site formally approved because I had seen how frequent changes to the site had delayed projects indefinitely. The site had another major advantage that, being in the heart of Delhi Cantt, it would save considerable time in commuting. In fact, most personnel would be even able to walk or cycle to the office, thereby also contributing to a green environment.

We had decided right at the outset that the TSB should be an iconic building, something that we could be proud of. Since it would be visible from the air as aircraft came in to land at the IGI Airport, it needed to be pleasing to look at, yet functionally efficient. For this, we decided to call in experts from outside to design the building. We gave the designers our vision of the building, and they came up with a most contemporary and apt design. The design envisaged two wings to be connected with a circular bridge area, topped by an Ashoka Chakra, depicting the crossed swords and shield which is the Army insignia. Once the concept was approved, it was now time to get on with the actual design of the building, the floor plan and specifications, and most importantly, the amenities. In doing so, we also had to rein in our ambitions to remain within the budget. An idea to have a rooftop helipad, for example, had to be shelved. The plans and proposals kept going up and down the various departments of the MoD and were in the final stages of approval when I retired.

Gen Manoj Pande, in turn, further carried forward the project, which was finally approved in early 2023, for an amount of Rs 760 crore, to be completed by 2025. I am sanguine that once completed, it will be something we will all be proud of. Continuity and Change go hand in hand.

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Part 5

Reflections

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5

Old Soldiers Never Die . . .

Army Day 2022 was done and dusted. The last Army Day to be held in New Delhi. The DMA had asked us to shift it out of Delhi, but the notice was too short. The heavier equipment, the tanks, APCs, specialist vehicles and guns had already arrived in Delhi. The work on getting them ready for the Army Day Parade had already begun. From my experience as GOC, Delhi Area, I knew what a complex exercise this was. I pointed out to the DMA that Army Day was but a full-dress rehearsal for Republic Day to follow. Even if the Army Day Parade were to be shifted out, the effort for the Republic Day would still be necessary and would amount to a duplication of effort and resultant wasteful expenditure. If the spirit behind this proposal was that the rest of the country too should get a feel of the Army, then that was already happening, through the Colour Presentation Ceremonies, Command Investiture Parades and Army outreach programmes conducted throughout the year pan-India. I had myself presented the Colours on behalf of the President to the Dogra Regiment at their Regimental Centre in Faizabad (UP) and to the Parachute Regiment at Bengaluru.

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My views prevailed, though I don't think the CDS was too happy with my stance.

At my final press conference, I was quite at ease. My tenure was coming to an end, and despite the Covid pandemic, we had been able to achieve a number of breakthroughs. I thanked all the media persons for the support they had extended to me and for their responsible journalism. Expectedly my views on Galwan and Eastern Ladakh were sought. I highlighted that the events starting from May 2020 had changed the entire operational paradigm, as I had mentioned on several occasions in the past. We were no longer on the defensive and had imposed costs on China and the PLA, contrary to the narrative being peddled by some China lovers, that only we were at the receiving end. The scale of our deployment and the requisite infrastructure that had been built up had made it clear that a unilateral attempt to change the status quo would be severely contested. The only option now was to get back to the negotiating table, revive the stalled SR levels talks and resolve the boundary question. It could not be business as usual. On Pakistan, I reiterated that we have always wanted peaceful relations with Pakistan and that we are always ready for a dialogue. It was for Pakistan to decide what was in their best interests and whether their so-called strategy of 'death by a thousand cuts' had really paid any dividends. I pointed out that even if their strategy was death by a thousand cuts, the 'thousandth plus one cut' was in our hands and so they would always be at the receiving end.

As far as the region was concerned, the unrest in some of our neighbouring countries, particularly in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, was a matter of concern. Any unrest on our borders, whether land or maritime, has an adverse law-and-order fallout in our border states, so it was in our interest that these countries stabilize at the earliest (Manipur had not happened then). On

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the Ukraine–Russia conflict, my views were that there would be many lessons to be learnt that would really emerge once the war was over and histories written. What was immediately clear though was that wars can still happen and they are not relics of the past. We ourselves had come to the brink of war, and therefore there was a need for robust capability development. Power, especially military power, flows from the barrel of the gun. China, of course, would remain our first and foremost concern, their rapaciousness knowing no bounds. In July 2020, at the height of the Ladakh crisis, they even raised a fresh claim on the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary deep inside Bhutanese territory.[1]

We had been able to achieve much on the HR front, particularly in the grant of PC to women officers. I had also opened up combat aviation to women officers, two of whom were undergoing training. I had hoped that they would have qualified during my tenure, in which case I would have personally gone to present them their 'Wings', but that was not to be, due to Covid-induced delays.[2] I also pointed out that during my tenure, there was representation at the Army Commander level, not only of the Infantry and Armoured Corps but also of the Mechanized Infantry, Engineers, Artillery and Air Defence, which just went to prove that there was no 'lanyard' culture and that merit and merit alone was the deciding factor. We had walked the talk and restored the confidence of the rank and file of the organization.

One can't choose one's comrades—superiors, subordinates or peers. But what one can do is learn from them all, the good and the bad. The good to emulate and the bad to discard. The good list is endless—Madan Das (first Commanding Officer), Kanwar, Ashok Kapur, Harjeet, Muthu . . . Pargat Singh (first Subedar Major), Dilbagh Singh (Communist), Faqir . . . I

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really have been fortunate.[3] And my peers Vivek, Yogi, Lajpat and Ramesh with whom I had many an escapade; including driving the CO's jeep past the CO himself! The Adjutant's 'Secret' almirah used to be full of Warning Letters administered to us—I hope they have been preserved.

Not to forget my personal staff, especially during my Chief's tenure. Brig Vikrant Naik, the MA, Cols Katoch and Devvrat, the AMAs and the ADCs, Capt Taran, Muthappa, Vasim and Navin, who together made sure I reached the right place at the right time—and in the right frame of mind. The officers in the Chief's KRA cell, Brigs Rajiv Gadihoke and Mohit Seth and Cols Kuhite and Palande, who followed up on all my Key Result Areas for fructification. I have always believed that a Commander is only as good as his Staff and vice versa. If the Staff is timid, so will be the Commander. If the Commander is bureaucratic, the Staff will also indulge in nitpicking. I was fortunate to have an excellent team, always on the lookout to see how to get the work done.

At the foundation of all this are our gallant jawans, whose safety, honour and welfare we are committed to uphold. Whether one is an extrovert who can strike a rapport with the men through backslapping bonhomie or through little acts of kindness, the men instinctively know who is for them and who is just putting on a show. We have to remember that when we as Young Officers join the unit, they have to accept us and not the other way around. Once at a unit reunion at Ambala, I was with a group of retired JCOs, reminiscing about the 'good old times'—the 1980s, and how pay used to be distributed in cash, down to even ten rupees—no rounding off. During one such pay-parade, one of the jawans had turned obstinate. He wanted to go on leave, and the pay he was getting—may be some 200-odd rupees, not being enough, he wanted more. The

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Senior JCO assisting me expressed his helplessness, all the cash was accounted for. It was one of the few times I was carrying my wallet and wonder of wonders, it had some 100-plus rupees in it which I gave to that boy, I don't remember who, but the situation was resolved. Sub Jasmel Singh, who was part of the group, piped up, '*Sahib-ji, meinu yaad hai. Oo main siga*' (Sir, I remember. That was me). I guess that's the day I really became one of them. Little acts of kindness go a long way. The ranks we wear on our shoulders are only a reflection of the long hours, sweat and blood that our boys have put in.

Quite rightly is it said, 'There are no good Officers or bad Officers; only good Regiments or bad Regiments.' Our men are our constituency, the only difference being that they don't elect us. All the more reason therefore, to do what is right by them. It is when they are mired in quicksand, an operation gone wrong, for example, that we have to extend a helping hand. I was fortunate that my superiors always held my hand and backed me up, and I only hope that I have repaid their trust and faith in me, by doing the same for my subordinates.

In the second week of April, the Army Commanders Conference was held. On 16 April, I hosted a dinner for all the Army Commanders and PSOs at the Army House. It was during the course of the evening that the announcement for Gen Manoj Pande to be the next COAS was received. It was a strange coincidence that my nomination had also been made while at dinner at the Navy Chief's residence. Veena and I were the first to congratulate Manoj and Archana, and we opened a bottle of bubbly to mark the occasion. It was like déjà vu.

Veena and I called on President Ram Nath Kovind and his wife, to pay our respects and bid them farewell. The President and his wife were their gracious selves. In fact, the President used to always call me up on Army Day or my birthday to

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extend his best wishes. He would also call up on other occasions too, to extend his condolences. I assured the Commander-in-Chief that the Army was in fine fettle and ready to take on any challenges that may arise in the future. The President expressed his regrets that it was unfortunate that we had not been able to meet more often in person due to the Covid pandemic but that was unavoidable. Veena apprised Smt. Savita Kovind about all the work done by the AWWA, for the welfare of our families and next-of-kin of our fallen soldiers. With that, we took our leave.

On 30 April 2022, I got up as usual and changed into my uniform. In my engagements of the day, Nb Sub SK Tiwari, my PA, who had been with me for some time, efficient as always, had very helpfully entered 'Retirement Day'. I went out and inspected the Residential Guard and gave them my 'Shabash' for their hard work. We had already had a high-tea the previous evening to bid farewell to all the staff. Our personal effects had all been packed and moved to 20 Mandir Marg in Delhi Cantt, since as per tradition, once the outgoing Chief completes the handing-over formalities, he does not return to the Army House. Once you leave, you leave. Veena, Isha and Simon and Arvin (my grandson), Amala and her fiancé Rahul, my mother-in-law, were all present. From the Army House, we went to the National War Memorial where I laid a wreath for the last time. During the two-minute silence, I made a silent prayer for all those brave souls who had died on my watch, whether due to enemy action or natural calamities. Seeing the National Flag flutter in the early morning breeze to the strains of the 'Last Post' brought a lump to my throat.

From there to the lawns of the South Block for the Ceremonial Guard of Honour. Before entering the South Block, I had a quick word and handshakes with my journalist

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friends. In the Chief's Lounge, all the PSOs and their wives were waiting for us and we had a cup of tea together. After thanking them all and bidding them farewell, I made my way to my Office. For a change, there were no files to be seen, except for one folder placed in the centre of the desk. Gen Manoj Pande and his wife, Archana, entered and we had a small photo session. At the stroke of noon, we signed on the dotted line, and I handed over the Chief's Baton to Gen Manoj Pande. It was his Army now, and I could not have handed over to a better person. Veena and I spent a few more minutes with the Chief and his wife, to allow our staff to move out. And then it was down the corridor and out of the South Block. Getting into the car, we drove away, never to look back.

Prior to my retirement, I had conveyed to all media persons that I would be going into a self-imposed *maun vrat*, a sabbatical for six months. A few journalists did contact me once or twice, especially when the Agnipath Scheme was announced, but I conveyed my regrets and they too respected my wishes. I used the time to complete the thesis of my PhD for which I had enrolled way back in 2016, and which had been stuttering along. In June this year (2023), I was finally awarded my doctorate for my work on 'Harmonizing Naga Customs, Traditions and Institutions in the Context of Peace and Development'. I can now add a 'Dr' to my name. If there is one thing I realized during the course of my research, it is that Diversity, Inclusivity and Equality (DIE) is the only way forward to realize our full potential as a nation. The moment any group or community feels victimized or marginalized, it sows the seeds of discord for future conflict and exposes fault lines that can be exploited by those who want to dismember us. These groups too must be equally responsible and abide by the Constitution of India, and not take the law into their own hands. Our diversity should be

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our asset. We must move forward from 'Unity in Diversity' to 'Strength in Diversity'.

Sometimes I am asked as to why I was not appointed as the CDS. My response has always been that I never questioned the wisdom of the government when they made me Chief, so why should I do so now? As I mentioned in my interview with *The Week*, 'At the end of the day, it does not matter what rank you retired at, but the reputation you retired with.'[4]

'Waheguruji ka Khalsa, Waheguruji ki Fateh'

(The Pure of the Lord are Victorious)

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Acknowledgements

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If I were to even try to thank all those who have been of great help in writing this book or have even been the inspiration behind the incidents I have narrated, the list would be endless. In some manner, their contributions have been acknowledged within the book itself. My first Commanding Officer, Lt Col Madan Das, for example, who was more like a father figure. Similarly, all those who I met in my journey through life—friends, superiors and subordinates—all of whom have contributed to make me what I am. We are all a sum of our experiences, both good and bad, and I have had my share of both.

I had not planned to write a book, so when I finally got down to it, it was mostly from memory. Whenever I needed prodding, I reached out to family and friends to see if they could fill in the blanks. Sometimes, they too were taken aback by a particular reference that had all but faded from even their memory. My brother Nitin, residing in the US, was instrumental in getting the facts right, of our early years, though he too had to confess sometimes, that I remembered more than he did. My closest colleagues in the unit, Vivek Ananthakrishnan, Lajpat Rai and Ramesh Menon, were the ones who were the most helpful,

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particularly about events from Bikaner to Sri Lanka. For the later chapters, I had to reach out across the years to the present incumbents of the appointments I had once held. One such person who comes to mind is Maj Gen Vikas Lakhera, who till recently was the Inspector General Assam Rifles (North) at Kohima, who not only filled in the blanks but also gave me an update on the prevailing sentiments, particularly in the aftermath of adversative operations carried out by the Security Forces. I was acutely conscious of the fact that as a retired officer, I should not ask for any information from any serving officer that could put them in an awkward position. This was particularly true for Lt Gens Paramjit Sangha and BS Raju, who were my Director Generals of Military Operations and closely involved in the Galwan affair.

More than once, I wondered what style to adopt and the detail I should go into. In this, my wife, Veena, had an important role to play, in ensuring that I found just the right balance. Too much detail would not only be boring for a military reader, but equally of little relevance to a lay reader. The narrative had to be much more free-flowing and not the cut-and-dried style of military appreciations. I have to thank her, therefore, for this very practical advice, which I am sure will contribute a lot in making the narrative hit the right spot for a range of readers across all walks of life and ages. I did not write the book in a strict chronological order, but I did the chapter on Battalion Command first, which was the closest to my heart. This I showed to my daughters, Isha and Amala, my sister-in-law, Uma, and her husband, Hitesh, as also Veena's friend Shailaja, who has been a childhood friend. Their feedback both in terms of readability and content was most valuable, particularly Shailaja's feedback that it left her wanting for more. Thus encouraged, I was able to proceed apace.

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Many thanks are also due to my erstwhile PA, Naib Subedar Santosh Tiwari, who continued providing me secretarial support out of the goodness of his heart. Although I typed out the manuscript myself, he was instrumental in getting all the photos together, spanning over half a century, scanning and shortlisting these, for them to eventually find their way into the book. I must also thank all my friends in the media, both electronic and print, for their unstinting support and balanced coverage, including permission to use some of the photos that appear in the book.

Finally, I must thank the publishers, Penguin Random House India and the entire team, for making this book happen. If it had not been for Gurveen, I might never have gotten around to writing a book. The other members of the editorial team, Ralph and Anushree, who were ever so understanding, often responding to some of my very basic queries—how to use the tracking function for example, so patiently. I consider myself fortunate to have had this very dedicated team assisting me in my maiden attempt at writing a book.

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List of Abbreviations

Absent Without Leave	–	AWL
Additional Director General	–	ADG
Adjutant-General	–	AG
Aide de Camp	–	ADC
Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief	–	AOC-in-C
Anti-Infiltration Obstacle System	–	AIOS
Area of Responsibility	–	AOR
Army Commander (Colloquial for GOC-in-C)	–	Army Cdr
Assam Rifles	–	AR
Assistant Adjutant-General	–	AAG
Assistant Adjutant and Quarter Master General	–	AA & QMG or AQ
Brigade Major	–	BM
Brigadier General Staff	–	BGS
Coursemate	–	CM
Chief of Army Staff	–	COAS

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Chief of Integrated Defence Staff to the Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee	–	CISC
Commander	–	Cdr
Commanding Officer	–	CO
Counter Insurgency Force	–	CIF
Counter Insurgency/ Counter Terrorism	–	CI/CT
Defence Secretary	–	Def Secy or Defsec
Deputy Chief of Army Staff	–	DCOAS
Director General Information Services	–	DGIS
Director General Military Intelligence	–	DGMI
Director General of Military Operations	–	DGMO
Director General of Staff Duties	–	DGSD
Divisional Officer	–	DivO
Engineer-in-Chief	–	E-in-C
External Affairs Minster	–	EAM
Foreign Secretary	–	FS
General Officer Commanding	–	GOC (plural GsOC)
General Officer Commanding-in-Chief	–	GOC-in-C (Army Cdr)
General Staff Officer Grade 1	–	GSO 1
Gentleman Cadet	–	GC
Infantry	–	Inf
Independent	–	Indep or (I)
Intelligence	–	Int
Inspector General Assam Rifles	–	IGAR
Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies	–	IPCS
Junior Commissioned Officers	–	JCO
Key Result Area	–	KRA
Long-Term Perspective Plan	–	LTPP
Master General of Ordnance/Sustenance	–	MGO, MGS

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Major General, General Staff	–	MGGS
Military Operations	–	MO
Military Secretary	–	MS
Mountain	–	Mtn
National Socialist Council of Nagaland	–	NSCN
National Security Adviser	–	NSA
Observer Research Foundation	–	ORF
Order of Battle	–	ORBAT
Ordnance Factory Board	–	OFB
Other Ranks	–	OR
Operations	–	Ops
Over Ground Workers	–	OGW
Parachute	–	Para
Passing-out Parade	–	POP
People's Liberation Army	–	PLA
Prime Minister	–	PM
Quarter Master General	–	QMG
Raksha Mantri, Raksha Rajya Mantri	–	RR, RRM
Rashtriya Rifles	–	RR
Regiment	–	Regt
Second-in-Command	–	2iC
Special Representative	–	SR
Signals Officer-in-Chief	–	SO-in-C
Situation Report	–	Sitrep
United Service Institution	–	USI
Vice Chief of Army Staff	–	VCOAS

Ranks (in decreasing order of seniority)

Officers

General	–	Gen
Lieutenant General	–	Lt Gen

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Major General	–	Maj Gen
Brigadier	–	Brig
Colonel	–	Col
Lieutenant Colonel	–	Lt Col
Major	–	Maj
Captain	–	Capt
Lieutenant	–	Lt
Second Lieutenant	–	2/Lt (now discontinued)

JCO and OR

Subedar Major	–	SM
Subedar	–	Sub
Naib Subedar	–	Nb Sub
Havildar	–	Hav
Naik	–	Nk
Lance Naik	–	L/Nk
Sepoy	–	Sep

Army Formations (in decreasing order of levels)—Commanded By—Known As

Indian Army	–	Gen	–	COAS (Chief)
Command (Army Cdr)	–	Lt Gen	–	GOC-in-C
Corps	–	Lt Gen	–	GOC, Corps Cdr
Division (Div)	–	Maj Gen	–	GOC, Div Cdr
Brigade (Bde)	–	Brig	–	Cdr
Battalion (Bn)	–	Col	–	CO
Company (Coy)	–	Maj / Lt Col	–	Coy Cdr
Platoon (Pl)	–	Sub/Nb Sub	–	Pl. Cdr
Section (Sec)	–	Hav	–	Sec. Cdr

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Notes

1.2 From Civvies to Uniform

1. Later renamed as the Officer Training Academy (OTA).
2. An official civil dress, white shirt over grey trousers.

2.1 Bole So Nihal, Sat Sri Akal

1. The Colonel of the Regiment is an honorary position usually held by the senior-most officer of that Regiment. He is like a father figure and looks after the interests of the Regiment.
2. Brigade Major, or BM, is the senior staff officer in a Brigade who deals with all operational matters.
3. 'The Brasstacks Crisis', Centre for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, 16 November 2022, https://armscontrolcenter.org/the-brasstacks-crisis/#:~:text=The%20Brasstacks%20Crisis%20was%20a,exercise%20since%20World%20War%20II.

2.2 To Foreign Shores: From Regimental Centre to the IPKF

1. The GOC-in-C is more commonly referred to as the Army Commander; not to be confused with the Army Chief.

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2. The term 'separated family accommodation' has since been replaced by field area family accommodation (FAFA) due to the negative connotation of the word 'separated'. The quarters are proper houses, specially earmarked for this purpose.
3. Name intentionally omitted.

2.3 Line and Staff

1. Lt Gen YK Joshi was the Army Commander under me during the Ladakh crisis of 2020. Lt Gen Asit Mistry took over from me as GOC, Delhi Area, then was the Commandant, NDA, before retiring.
2. Later as a Lt Gen, Sengupta commanded the 14 Corps at Leh during the crisis period.
3. Later, Maj Gen SS Sandhu commanded the 14 Infantry Division before taking voluntary retirement to become the director of HelpAge India, which post he held for several years.
4. Post the Kargil War, a new 14 Corps was raised with its HQ at Leh. 8 Mountain Division now looks after this entire area facing Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, the erstwhile AOR of just 121(I) Inf Bde. The other Division of 14 Corps, 3 Inf Div, looks after Eastern Ladakh-facing Chinese Occupied Tibet.
5. Later, Lt Gen RR Nimbhorkar, who retired as the Master General of Ordnance (MGO).

2.4 Meerut: Adieu to Lucky Seven

1. Bogra in Bangladesh had been captured during the 1971 Indo–Pak war and (then) Capt SG Pitre had been part of that action.
2. SHAPE is a system of medical classification where SHAPE-1 means fit for all duties, anywhere.
3. SB-4 has since been discontinued, and all officers are promoted on a time-scale at eleven years of service, to the rank of Lt Col. SB-3 is now the first promotion board for the select rank of Col at around fourteen to fifteen years of service. The balance officers get promoted on time-scale to the non-select rank of Col at twenty-one years of service.

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2.5 Battalion Command: Iron Fist in a Velvet Glove

1. Write-ups of the operation and on Mustafa Khan were published in various dailies, including the *Kashmir Times* of 1 August and 9 September 2001, and the *Greater Kashmir* of 30 July, 3 August, 4 August and 5 August 2001.

2.6 Look East: '*Mingala Bar Khimbya*'

1. Manoj is now our ambassador in Indonesia and Raj the ambassador at Croatia.
2. Senior General Than Shwe was also the de-facto President and Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services. Vice Senior General Maung Aye was the Vice President and Deputy C-in-C, while Gen Thura Shwe Mann was the Chief of the Army, the Tatmadaw.
3. Mr Yaeger later married Ms Neichu, an Indian Naga from Kohima. During my tenure in Kohima, I met them as well as her mother, Neidonuo Angami, Padma Shri. During my official visit to Israel, I visited them at their kibbutz near Tel Aviv and had lunch with them. Mr Mayer is currently the Israeli ambassador to Vietnam.
4. '*Mingala Bar*' is the formal Myanmar greeting like 'hello', said with a slight bow and the palms folded together (namaste). Gents say '*Mingala Bar Khimbya*', while ladies say '*Mingala Bar Shin*'. '*Kye Zu Tin Bar Dae*' is 'thank you very much' or simply just '*Kye Zu*', 'thanks'.

3.1 Back to Soldiering: The First Star

1. Peace and war deployments often differ, as do the AOR. The deployment effected during peace is called the Border Management Posture.

3.2 Eastwards Again: Change of Uniform and Role

1. Lt Gen KJ Singh retired as the Army Commander, Western Command, and was to be my boss again when I commanded 2 Corps.

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2. Lt Gen Arun Sahni retired as the Army Commander, South Western Command. Lt Gen Narasimhan after retirement, was the DG of the Centre for Contemporary China Studies, which functions under the MEA. It is presently headed by Lt Gen YK Joshi.
3. Lt Gen Suhag moved as the VCOAS shortly thereafter and took over as the COAS in due course.
4. Sushanta Talukdar and Praveen Swami, 'Sumi Naga Tribal Siege Forces Insurgents to Flee Camp at Mukalimi', *The Hindu,* 12 May 2016, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/sumi-naga-tribal-siege-forces-insurgents-to-flee-camp-at-mukalimi/article5519173.ece.
5. Samudra Gupta Kashyap, 'Nagaland: Angry Mob Raids Dimapur Central Jail, Lynches 35-Year-Old Rape Accused Alleged to Be "Bangladeshi Infiltrator"', the *Indian Express*, 6 March 2015, https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/nagaland-mob-break-into-prison-drag-out-and-lynch-rape-accused-to-death/.

3.3 Kharga Corps and Delhi Area: From Operations to Administration

1. Vipul and Rajesh both became Lt Gens and Jitender, Maj Gen.
2. Later, Lt Gen Bhinder, who retired as Army Commander South-Western Command (SWC).
3. Now Lt Gen Mohit Malhotra, commanding 12 Corps.
4. Later, Lt Gen Ranbir Singh, retired as Army Commander Northern Command, and now Administrative Member, AFT.
5. K.C. Verma, 'Administrative Failure and Other Learnings From Haryana's Jat Riots', The Wire, 11 June 2016, https://thewire.in/politics/the-prakash-singh-committee-report-administrative-failure-and-other-learnings-from-haryanas-jat-riots.
6. Later Lt Gen Ajai Singh, who retired as C-in-C, Andaman and Nicobar Command, India's first and only tri-service command.

3.4 Bharat Darshan and Eastern Command

1. Acharya Devvrat is presently the Governor of Gujarat, and Shri Thakur is the Leader of the Opposition in the state.

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2. After commanding a corps in Eastern Command, Lt Gen Kalita became the Army Commander, retiring in December 2023.
3. The NSCK (KK) had been renamed as the NSCN (KN).
4. Snehesh Alex Philip, 'Modi Govt Moves with Arunachal Frontier Highway, among India's "Toughest" Projects Yet, China in Mind', ThePrint, 26 November 2022, https://theprint.in/defence/modi-govt-moves-with-arunachal-frontier-highway-among-indias-toughest-projects-yet-china-in-mind/1232207/.
5. Something like AHCM is a rare form of hypertrophic cardiomyopathy that involves thickening of the distal portion of the left ventricular wall.
6. Operation Golden Bird was an operation conducted along the Indo–Myanmar border in the North-eastern state of Mizoram under the aegis of 57 Mountain Division (57 Mtn Div) in April–May 1995.

4.1 Break In

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2. Raj Chengappa and Ananth Krishnan, 'India-China Standoff: All You Need to Know About Doklam Dispute', *India Today*, 7 July 2017, https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/20170717-india-china-bhutan-border-dispute-doklam-beijing-siliguri-corridor-1022690-2017-07-07.
3. The Torsa Nala separates the Doklam Plateau, illegally occupied by China, and the Jampheri Ridge, held by a small detachment of the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA).
4. Now Lt Gen JB Chaudhary, DCOAS (CD & S).
5. Later, as Lt Gen, commanded the Srinagar-based 15 Corps, and is currently the Commandant, Army War College, Mhow.
6. Snehesh Alex Philip, 'How Tour of Duty Pilot Project Became Agnipath, a Journey of 254 Meetings Lasting 750 Hours', ThePrint, 23 June 2022, https://theprint.in/defence/how-tour-

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of-duty-pilot-project-became-agnipath-a-journey-of-254-meetings-lasting-750-hours/1007921/.

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8. PNS, 'Army Ready with Its "Op Namaste"', *The Pioneer*, 28 March 2020, https://www.dailypioneer.com/2020/page1/army-ready-with-its----op---namaste---.html.
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11. The unofficial account of this operation can be read in the book *Balidan* by Swapnil Pandey.
12. Aishwarya Dharni, 'Shaurya Chakra Ptr Sonam Tshering Killed Pakistani Terrorist in Close Quarter Battle', indiatimes.com, 26 January 2021, https://www.indiatimes.com/trending/social-relevance/republic-day-sonam-tshreing-tamang-shaurya-chakra-532853.html.
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14. 'China Study Group', Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/China_Study_Group.
15. Later Deputy Chief of Army Staff (Strategy) and currently in the NSCS. Air Marshal Krishna retired as CISC, HQ IDS.
16. PLA Battalions are commanded by Lt Cols as against our Battalions commanded by Cols. This one rank difference continues up the chain.
17. So called because there was already an HMCL in place at the level of Maj Gen or equivalent.

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18. In our case, Maj Gen AM Bapat, GOC 3 Mtn Div.
19. Express News Service, 'Original Hero of Galwan, a Warkari at Heart, Lt Col Hasabnis Dies at 90', the *Indian Express*, 11 January 2022, https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/pune/original-hero-of-galwan-a-warkari-at-heart-lt-col-hasabnis-dies-at-90-7717026/.
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25. Salami-slicing tactics is the practice of using a series of many small actions to produce a much larger action or result that would be difficult or unlawful to perform all at once.

4.2 At Close Quarters: A Nation Responds

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2. Later Lt Gen, commanded 3 Corps and currently, GOC UB Area.
3. Lt Gen HS Panag (Retd), 'India Sits on Black Top with Helmet under Its Boots. A 1962 Tactic by China Is Now Likely', ThePrint, 9 September 2020, https://theprint.in/opinion/india-sits-on-black-top-with-helmet-under-its-boots-a-1962-tactics-by-china-is-now-likely/498462/.
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5. Tim Edwards, 'China Rattled by Tibetan Commandos Used by New Delhi; Wanted to Teach India a Lesson: Experts', the *EurAsian Times*, 9 September 2020, https://eurasiantimes.com/china-rattled-by-tibetan-commandos-used-by-new-delhi-wanted-to-teach-india-a-lesson-experts/.
6. Infantry Combat Vehicles, which provide armoured protection against small arms fire.
7. 'Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India–China Border Affairs', Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Working_Mechanism_for_Consultation_and_Coordination_on_India%E2%80%93China_Border_Affairs.
8. Later Additional Secretary in the same Division before moving on to become our Ambassador to Nepal in June 2022.
9. Restoring land forms implies restoring the physical characteristics of the ground. For example, if a row of trenches has been dug, then these have to be filled up. Similarly, if a wall of stones has been built, then not only has it to be brought down but the stones have to be scattered all around, leaving no trace of a wall ever having been there at all.
10. Rahul Singh, '4th Round of India-China Lt Gen-Level Talks Today', *Hindustan Times,* 14 July 2020, https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/4th-round-of-india-china-lt-gen-level-talks-today/story-LMbMtAGmkvHhcWRimCBqNL.html.
11. Depsang in Northern Ladakh and Demchok in Southern Ladakh had both been the locations of similar stand-offs, starting from 2013. Talks had been ongoing to resolve these issues and had made considerable headway when the situation

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in Eastern Ladakh escalated, forcing these two issues on to the back-burner.

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13. Ibid.
14. Express Web Desk, 'Sixth Round of Talks: India, China Agree to Stop Sending More Troops to Frontline', the *Indian Express,* 22 September 2020, https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-china-lac-talks-ladakh-joint-statement-6606633/.
15. Abhishek Bhalla, 'China's Aggressive Behaviour Violates Bilateral Agreement: Rajnath Singh to Chinese Defence Minister', *India Today,* 5 September 2020, https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/china-s-agressive-behaviour-violates-bilateral-agreement-rajnath-singh-chinese-defence-minister-1718871-2020-09-05.
16. PTI, 'Army Commanders of India and China Hold 6th Round of Talks on Border Standoff', the *Economic Times*, 21 September 2020, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/army-commanders-of-india-and-china-hold-6th-round-of-talks-on-border-standoff/articleshow/78232903.cms?from=mdr.
17. As a Maj Gen, PGK Menon had been the ADG, Complaints and Advisory Board. He had always given very mature advice and this prompted me to select him for 14 Corps. Presently, he is the Military Secretary at Army HQ.
18. Sangeeta Nair, 'India and China Border Issue Remains Unresolved: Defence Minister Rajnath Singh in His Statement in Parliament', Jagran Josh, 15 September 2020, https://www.jagranjosh.com/current-affairs/defence-minister-rajnath-singh-statement-on-indiachina-lac-row-in-parliament-1600151188-1.
19. Shakir Mir, 'J&K Fake Encounter: Army Court Martials Captain but Does That Provide Closure?', The Quint, 10 March 2023, https://www.thequint.com/opinion/jk-fake-encounter-army-

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court-martials-captain-but-does-that-provide-closure#read-more.

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21. Maninder Dabas, 'The Story of the Sumdorong Chu Standoff - When India Avoided War with China through Sheer Diplomacy', Indiatimes.com, 20 August 2016, https://www.indiatimes.com/news/the-story-of-the-sumdorong-chu-standoff-when-india-avoided-war-with-china-through-sheer-diplomacy-260266.html.
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24. PTI, 'India, China Begin Disengagement in Gogra-Hotsprings PP-15 in Eastern Ladakh', *Outlook*, 8 September 2022, https://www.outlookindia.com/national/india-china-begin-disengagement-in-gogra-hotsprings-pp-15-in-eastern-ladakh-news-222041.
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4.3 Break Out: Continuity and Change

1. Brig Vats went on to command 19 Inf Division and is currently the Commandant DSSC, Wellington, in the rank of Lt Gen.
2. Later Army Commander, Southern Command, before retiring as the VCOAS. Presently, Administrative Member in the AFT, Delhi Bench.
3. Ministry of Finance, Department of Expenditure, Letter No. 7(2) E. Coord / 95 dated 30 May 1995.

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11. XVII Corps Mountain Strike Corps, Global Security.org, https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/india/corps-xvii.htm.
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china-asean-agree-to-try-to-conclude-non-aggression-pact-on-south-china-sea-feud-in-three-years/article67075327.ece.

14. 'Functions of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS)' Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Defence, 3 February 2020, https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=198899.
15. This does not include the functional commands that do not have any operational role, viz. the Training Commands of each of the three Services and the Maintenance Command of the Air Force.
16. Lecture delivered by the author at USI, India in December 2022.
17. The Cantonments Act, 2006, https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/2066/1/200641.pdf.
18. Rahul Bedi, 'Why General Naravane's Criticism of Approach to Integrated Theatre Commands Is Significant', The Wire, 6 January 2023, https://thewire.in/security/general-naravane-theaterisation-criticism-significance.
19. I was personally convinced about this and wrote an article on it post-retirement, in the February 2023 issue of the *Indian Aerospace and Defence Journal*.
20. For a detailed organogram pre- and post-restructuring, refer Appendix A.
21. As a Maj Gen commanding 1 Armoured Division that was part of 2 Corps, I had known him to be extremely diligent. He later became the C-in-C ANC, before retiring in April 2023.
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4.4 Reorganization

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9. Meenakshi Lekhi is the current Minister of State for External Affairs and Culture of India, holding the post since 7 July 2021.
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4.5 Consolidation

1. Kalapani is an area under Indian administration as part of Pithoragarh district in the Kumaon Division of Uttarakhand, but it has also been claimed by Nepal since 1997.
2. Shri Vinay Mohan Kwatra is presently the Foreign Secretary.
3. India Today News Desk, 'Trust Me, All of You Will Reach Home Safely: India's Defence Attache to Sudan Returnees | Video', *India Today*, 27 April 2023, https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-defence-attache-assures-sudan-returnees-video-2365175-2023-04-27.
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5. Old Soldiers Never Die . . .

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